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IRON-ARMED ABE, The Hunchback Destroyer; Or, THE BLACK RIDERS' TERROR.

A TALE OF THE CITY OF THE DESERT.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,

AUTHOR OF "CACTUS JACK," "DON SOMBRERO," "LADY JAGUAR," "THE SCORPION BROTHERS," "CANYON DAVE," ETC., ETC.



"DOWN!" CRIED IRON ARMED ABE, IN A TERRIBLE VOICE. "DOWN, AND FEED THE VOLCANO FIRES!"

Iron-Armed Abe, The Hunchback Destroyer;

OR,

The Black Rider's Terror.

A Tale of the City of the Desert.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,
AUTHOR OF "LONG-HAIRED MAX," "BARRANCA
BILL," "CACTUS JACK," "THE SCORPION
BROTHERS," "BULLET HEAD," "CAN-
YON DAVE," "BUCKSHOT BEN,"
"LADY JAGUAR," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A STRANGE ADVENTURE.

"HALT! Keep your place or you are a dead man!"

There was no mistaking the inflection of the speaker's voice, the words were suggestive and the revolver which covered the head of Doctor Reuben Leyden did not waver one particle.

Doctor Rube was no fool and he put up his hands at once, but with a composure which told of good nerves behind all.

"Here I am!" he observed, cheerfully. "I hope you'll give me credit for what I have done and explain what is wanted."

"You are a doctor?"

"Beyond a doubt."

"A graduate of an Eastern college of medicine and fit for careful work?"

"Whoever told you so was well posted," declared Doctor Rube, less phlegmatically than before.

"Well, we are not road-agents, or cut-throats of any kind; we don't want your money nor your life; but we are in need of a good doctor. We have a little job which needs to be performed at once and in a skillful way. Hence, we want you."

"Where is the man?"

"That you must not know. Before we start your eyes must be bound, and you will be kept in utter ignorance of where you go and whom you doctor. Do you agree?"

Doctor Rube meditated. He did not really like the plan submitted, but in taking up his residence in this far Arizona land he had expected some odd experiences.

"How long will the job take?" he asked.

"A week, possibly!"

Doctor Rube stared in undisguised amazement. He had expected the answer to be two or three hours, or half the night at the furthest, but such as it was, it moved him out of even the power to express surprise.

The three men before him kept their places, their revolvers steadily covering the young doctor, and the wind came down from Tunnel Gap in miniature puffs and the ragged back of Alligator Ridge cut the last rays of the sun into bars of distinct golden hue.

"Well, are you going?" asked one of the men, after a pause.

"Going!" repeated Doctor Rube, wrathfully.

"Well, I guess not! I don't let myself out on a blindfold racket by the week. The very fact that you want to work such a game proves you are up to some underhand business. No; I won't go!"

He spoke sturdily, as was his nature, but the unknown spokesman did not seem in the least excited.

"Then," he coolly said, "we must oblige you, that's all. Men, keep your revolvers bearing on him, and if there is any harm done, let it be by yourselves. Now, right about, wheel!"

The speaker calmly laid hold of Doctor Rube's horse's bridle, and when the rider began to roar like a lion in a net a revolver was pressed against his head on each side.

Never was man more securely bagged, and it was evident his captors meant to keep him as they found him. He had not so much as a knife in the shape of weapons, while they were well armed and three against one.

He looked eagerly around, hoping to see some of the men of Snicker's Gulch, for though he had not long been located there he knew they would chip in with the cheerful alacrity of Western men to aid him now he was in danger.

He was soon deprived of the power of looking for aid, however, for when once where a halt was safe, his eyes were bandaged and he was significantly told to keep his hands down. Why he yielded so tamely, with his brave, energetic and positive nature, may be easily explained by stating that their revolvers were not to be defied.

And then the party went on, with Doctor Rube in a fever heat of wrath, but resolved to make the best of the matter. He was a good doctor, but his nomadic instincts had taken him to this remote land, and he had settled at Snicker's Gulch for a time in order to see Western life.

His career was developing with a rush, and he smiled grimly as he saw some of his old college pranks outdone by this Western drama, but he

little knew what strange events were in store for him.

For their own part his companions seemed to prefer to say little, and as none of his questions were satisfactorily answered, he soon became silent and the party rode on like specters in the somber night.

Two days later the same silent procession might have been seen going toward the southwest, a direction they had perseveringly kept all the while. Doctor Rube's eyes had long been unbound, but he had seen nothing except his grim, ordinary-looking captors and mile after mile of barren land which was at times a mere sandy desert.

He had been well used, and as they had given him the slowest horse in the lot, was allowed such privileges that he scarcely seemed a prisoner.

He no longer murmured. He had entered into the spirit of his adventure and, convinced that his life was not in danger, was resolved to go through phlegmatically and sensibly.

The hour was a little before sunset, and the strange travelers were on a stretch of land less level and barren than they had traversed before. A range of mountains arose before them and the manner of Doctor Rube's captors became more animated.

Suddenly the leader reined in his horse and sat gazing ahead. All, including the doctor, followed his example.

Two hundred yards away was a line of mesquite trees and bushes, an apology for a wood, but enough to arrest the gaze. From behind them horsemen were emerging, moving in lines of six each and keeping their alignments remarkably well.

Each horse was coal-black in color, as was every part of its outfit, saddle and all.

The peculiarity extended further.

Each and every rider was clad in black from top to toe, and with a uniformity which surprised Doctor Rube, though at that distance he could not analyze their dress, except to see that each wore a cutaway jacket and a helmet hat with drooping edges.

Stranger yet, each rider bore a lance, the point of which projected straight upward, the other end seeming to rest on or near the saddle.

The wooden part of this lance was black; the metal was steel, of such brightness that, as the sun struck upon the spears, a dazzling glitter was made.

The strange men were still riding from behind the bushes, when a man behind Doctor Rube audibly muttered:

"The Black Riders!"

No one answered, but each of Doctor Rube's companions removed his hat and sat bare-headed as the horsemen passed on. Fifty Doctor Rube counted, all wonderfully alike, and then the procession ceased and swept away toward the south, still by sixes.

The prisoner was not blind to what he had seen. The removal of the hats showed that his captors knew and rendered outward respect to the Black Riders, and he wondered who they were who wandered there over the Arizona deserts.

He asked, but received only a curt reply. Plainly the identity of the mysterious band was not to be lightly divulged from one corner of the earth to another.

His inquisitiveness seemed to remind his companions that his eyes were seeing too much and he was again blindfolded. They went on steadily. Anon, Doctor Rube knew by the ring of the hoof-strokes that they had reached harder ground. The road ascended too, and he knew they were on the mountain he had before seen.

At last they paused, and the fresh western breeze which touched the doctor's face showed him they had reached the top of the eminence.

"Stranger," said his guide, "I run a risk in doing it, but you have so wondered why we were taking you into the heart of Arizona that I am going to give you a sight of something which will surprise you. I am indiscreet to do this, and you must promise to say nothing of the affair to those you will see later."

"I promise," Doctor Rube readily answered.

"Then look with all your eyes."

His eyes were cleared and he obeyed the last order. Truly, he saw that which surprised him.

They stood on the mountain's summit, but though a second mountain was at the west and another north, a valley lay between. To speak more correctly, the mountain was in the form of a horse-shoe, and in the interior lay the depression.

Nor was this all; the latter place was not a desert, without vegetation or water, but a wilderness of green, in wood and meadow, and watered by a good-sized stream.

Nor was this all; in the center of the valley stood a city. Not an Eastern metropolis, but a village which would be called no less than a city in the West.

It deserved its name.

True, it was built of adobe, except for the presence of a dozen stone buildings, but these were substantial affairs which would do no dis-

credit to New York. Around them clustered scores of smaller buildings, and between the whole ran regular and broad streets.

Doctor Rube looked in wonder—in amazement. He would have been less surprised to see a mountain of solid gold as a city there.

"What do you think?" chuckled his guide.

"What in thunder is this place? Where are we, and what's its name?"

"For such as you it has no name and no existence. Only those who serve under the banner of him whom we serve can have part or parcel in this, the City of the Desert. I have gone beyond my authority in letting you behold it, but you have prated so much about this 'barren land' that I saw fit to undeceive you."

"Are we going there?"

"You shall see."

"Perhaps I shall like well enough to settle."

Doctor Rube spoke seriously, for it occurred to him that if this flourishing place was without a physician he could do better than at Snicker's Gulch.

"If you settle, it'll probably be under four feet of earth or in the bed of Golden Creek," the man observed.

"Have I been brought over a hundred miles to be slaughtered?"

"Not if you are prudent. Obey those who sent for you, and you need have no fear. It all lies with you."

"I have no wish to leave *terra firma* and shall hang on yet awhile if you are agreeable."

The last words were spoken mechanically, for his eyes had wandered to the north. There he saw a mountain-peak which was wholly without vegetation, while from the top ascended a thin, brown smoke which did not seem made by any wood or coal fire.

Doctor Rube needed no explanation to tell him that the peak was of volcanic nature. Some time lava had undoubtedly flowed over the rim of the dimly-seen crater and down the mountain-side. Probably it had been slumbering for scores, perhaps hundreds, of years, but the smoke showed that subterranean fires still existed and he wondered that the people of the city dared live under the foot of so deadly a thing.

He was rudely aroused from his thoughts. Some heavy object struck the ground near his horse with a tremendous thud, raising a cloud of dust, and then a huge stone bounded away down the slope. It had fallen from the cliff above and missed the riders by only a few feet.

CHAPTER II.

THE HUNCHBACK HERCULES.

DOCTOR RUBE and his companions looked upward simultaneously. The cliff reared its rocky head a hundred feet above, bare and unscalable, but at its very top a human figure was visible, and gazing down at them.

The last rays of the setting sun threw him into bold relief against the sky, and Doctor Rube marveled at the grotesqueness of his form.

He was at once a giant and a dwarf; Nature had given him the capacity for the first only to subdue him to the form of the second.

He had a large head, a heavy beard, immensely broad shoulders, long arms and muscular legs, but between his shoulders was a most disfiguring hump, which threw him out of manly proportions and made him seem repulsive.

Standing erect as he did, his arms, too, were so very long that his finger-tips extended below his knees.

On the whole, he made so uncouth and ugly a picture that Doctor Rube turned against him—nor was his fancy decreased by the loud and unmusical peal of laughter which followed.

The strange man suddenly swung his arms above his head, and seemed in high glee.

"Iron-Armed Abe!" muttered the doctor's nearest companion, and his face bore an alarmed look.

The leader, however, shook his fist at the man on the cliff in ungovernable rage.

"Oh! you diabolical imp of darkness!" he shouted. "So you are round again, are you? And you tried to kill us, you humpbacked monster! Oh! just wait till I get hold of you—that's all!"

"Bah! you are all empty words, Solon Camp!" rung out a deep, musical voice from the cliff—one which seemed strangely out of place coming from the deformed man. "You would not dare to tempt me did you not know that I have no wish to stain my hands with your miserable, cowardly blood."

"Beware!" cried Camp, unslinging his rifle.

"Bah!" again mocked the hunchback. "Why do you handle that toy when you know that I despise powder and ball? Ha! ha! fire away if you will. Here—see! I stand ready for your shot!"

The strange man threw open his coat, exposing his broad breast, and dared the shot; but Solon Camp did not fire. His hands dropped to his side.

"I can't do it—I've tried it before and failed. Men, I'll give any one of you a thou-

sand dollars to shoot him. Captain Diamond will see it paid."

"The lead ain't run, and the steel ain't tempered that'll kill Iron-Armed Abe," one stout fellow announced, with a dismal shake of his head.

"Come!" shouted the hunchback; "what are you going to do about it? Captain Diamond's bills float from every sign post in the city and offer a reward for me, dead or alive. Come and take me—I am waiting."

"Have it your way this time," said Camp, trying to beat a graceful retreat. "You shall see me again."

"Possibly, but you'll still be Solon Camp, the man who will cringe and creep rather than put on a bold face and stand firmly before his enemies. Well, you do wisely, and I advise you to go further and let your nimble legs carry you away from Golden Valley. Get you gone while you may."

"I don't run for any man," declared Camp, more courageously.

"Stay, then, if you will; remain and share the fate of Captain Diamond. Prepare for death, however, while you may. A curse and a cloud are over yonder city. The reign of the king grows short and he is going swiftly to his ruin. Death is waiting to embrace him and his Black Riders. Share their fate if you will, Solon Camp."

"Get back to Black Pit and hold communion with your other friends."

"Hal you don't dare accuse me in plain words of being in league with the Evil One, do you? Good! when I first appeared I was a hump-backed scoundrel and an imp of darkness. Now, your tongue wags less flippantly. So you wish me to return to the Black Pit. Good! I will, and I respectfully invite you to follow me. Come, Solon Camp; come to my home!"

Iron-Armed Abe stretched one long arm toward the smoking mountain and laughed wildly.

Doctor Rube looked at him in wonder not unmixed with awe. The melody and resonance of his voice were not only remarkable but in startling contrast to his unshapely form; and in spite of the ill work of Nature he had a species of dignity which was not lost on the physician.

Suddenly the latter found the hunchback's long right arm leveled in his own direction.

"Who is this stranger who seeks the City of the Desert?" he demanded. "Young man, if you contemplate mating with yonder demons I would say, better seek the company of the loathsome rattlesnake or the hungry jaguar. Only those who sell themselves to infamy can flourish there. The City of the Desert is a plague-spot; beware of it, and return while you may to the known world."

Doctor Rube raised his voice quickly, under the impulse of the moment.

"I am a prisoner; tell me where I am!"

"You are lost, forever lost. Those who come here as prisoners never go back. That's right; hold him fast, but all your arts cannot prevent me from saying that Captain Diamond, the most merciless of men, rules in yonder city. You ask where you are. No man can tell. This city, these mountains and yonder desert are nameless; they are unknown to all but Captain Diamond's cut throats and myself. As for me, I am the man born to ruin those who dwell yonder, and the day is not far away when I shall stand here and see the City of the Desert and its people silent in death and oblivion. All this shall I see!"

His voice rung out with startling force, and Camp, who had sprung forward to stop Doctor Rube's speech, stood in seeming alarm and said no more.

Iron-Armed Abe, however, had evidently freed his mind, for at the last word he waved his hand and disappeared. His going was so abrupt that they half-expected to see him return, but when a full minute had elapsed Camp drew a quivering sigh of relief.

"Mad!" he said, uneasily; "mad as a March hare. Come, men, get in motion; if he appears again I'll put a bullet through him."

Despite the boast Mr. Camp seemed seriously disturbed mentally, and when they moved on, after readjusting the doctor's eye bandage, they went in such dead silence, and with such an increase of speed, that the latter was not at fault to know the reason.

Boast as they might, they really feared Iron-Armed Abe, the deformed Hercules.

Doctor Rube wondered who he was. He was strange in more ways than one, but everything he had seen since the Black Riders crossed his vision had been strange; this City of the Desert, of which no Arizonian, so-called, seemed to know aught, was like a scene from an old fairy tale.

What the hunchback had said did not pass from his mind and he began to wonder more than ever what would be his experience in the mystic city.

Was he wanted for some simple case or for something as strange as what had gone before?

He regretted, now that it was too late, that he had not risked all in a combat with his captors when crossing the desert, but the time had

come and gone and he resolved to go on to the end and see what fate had in store for him.

As the party descended the mountain the shadows of night thickened rapidly around them, for, hemmed in by mountains as the valley was, darkness fell early and the last beams of the sun had some time before ceased to touch the upper peaks.

They reached the village and went steadily on, but the few people they met did not seem to notice Doctor Rube. No obstacles were interposing to prevent the consummation of the plans of his captors.

When they paused it was beside one of the large stone houses before mentioned, but not in front of it. They were at the rear, and by the rear they entered. There, the house had a yard inclosed by a wall six feet high and looked not unlike some Government institution.

Doctor Rube felt himself led along a paved way and into a house. There he threaded several passages and finally came to a halt. The bandage was removed from his eyes and he found himself in a well-lighted room with only Camp for a companion.

"He who sent me for you will soon be here," Camp at once explained. "You have been a sensible companion by the road and I wish you well, so I'll say that your future depends on yourself. He who is coming can be as gentle as a woman when pleased, but if crossed he is not less deadly than the jaguar. I remark thus so that you need make no mistake. Whatever you are told to do you had better perform promptly and faithfully."

"That'll all depend on circumstances," Doctor Rube sturdily answered. "If the work comes within my idea of what's right, well and good. Otherwise, I don't do it."

"Perhaps you had rather lose your life," Camp irritably said.

"If I see fit to take that course I suppose it's my own business, ain't it?"

This direct inquiry remained unanswered, for at that moment the door opened and another man appeared on the scene.

Camp hurriedly executed his best bow.

"Captain Diamond, Doctor Reuben Leyden," he said, with extreme politeness.

Doctor Rube looked attentively at the man who was said to hold his future in his hands. Captain Diamond, he had heard him called, and the name seemed appropriate, for the first article in the way of *minutiae* which the doctor observed was a brilliant ray of light which seemed to shoot out from the new-comer. This might have been various things, but practical Doctor Rube perceived that it was a huge and very brilliant diamond breast-pin.

Further than this, Captain Diamond was, perhaps, thirty years of age, tall, slender, dark-complexioned, with a pale face and dark, velvety eyes. He looked like a student but not like a cut-throat, and as Doctor Rube noted his plain, but elegant clothing, and his scrupulous neatness, he felt sure they would not be foes.

CHAPTER III.

A TERRIBLE ALTERNATIVE.

"CAPTAIN DIAMOND, Doctor Reuben Leyden!"

Camp spoke with the meekness of a man who is in the presence of his superior, but Diamond vouchsafed only the slightest bow.

"I'll not waste time in saying I am glad to see you, doctor, for the pleasure can hardly be mutual. I trust, however, that you have not been treated with any unnecessary harshness."

"Except that I am kidnapped, I have no fault to find," said the doctor, bluntly.

"Of course that is unpleasant, but I am about to prove to you that we are your friends, not your enemies. You have been brought here because we have a surgical operation to perform and you are reputed skillful. If you perform it faithfully you may return to Snicker's Gulch a hundred dollars richer in pocket."

"That's not bad."

Captain Diamond smiled, and the doctor could see no trace of the typical villain about him. He had a sort of unhealthy beauty, and would have been adored in Eastern society if he was a writer of poetry. Then, women would have raved over his dusky, waving hair, his dark eyes and his intellectual brow, as women will.

Could this be the man Iron-Armed Abe had declared to be a fiend?

"Before we work, let us eat," continued Diamond. "Your ride must have given you an appetite; follow me and you shall satisfy it."

Doctor Rube resolved to go with the tide in the affair, for a while at least, and he followed without question. He was conducted to a room where sat a table already spread, and it was not long before a substantial supper was placed upon it.

Then the strangely-met companions ate together, talking of matters of the world in about the same humor that two chance travelers might converse to kill time. Captain Diamond, despite his remoteness from the center of civilization, was well informed, and he talked with the ease of an intelligent and educated man.

Doctor Rube marveled more than ever, but his every attempt to make Diamond speak of the City of the Desert was useless. The various traps were skillfully avoided.

Supper over, Diamond produced a pair of meerschaums and they smoked together. It may be mentioned as a curious fact that, in this wild land, their conversation was of a celebrated *prima donna* whom both had seen.

When their pipes were empty the host quietly arose.

"I will now conduct you to your patient, and explain what is wanted," he blandly announced.

The doctor made no opposition but promptly followed. He was conducted through a hall and to a second room. It was well lighted, and as he entered he saw that it was furnished as a bed-chamber.

Two persons were visible; a woman of abundant form and a man as far the reverse.

As they did not appear like invalids, Doctor Rube glanced toward the bed. There his gaze was arrested by one of the most beautiful faces he had ever seen; the face of a woman of most remarkable loveliness.

She was young, with light-brown hair and a remarkably clear complexion, though there was a good deal of color in her cheeks, and every feature was so shapely and perfect that Doctor Rube at once pronounced her the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

She slept. Her eyes were veiled, long lashes swept her cheeks, and she seemed a sleeping Hebe.

But even there the physician saw no sign of a patient. A more healthy person it would be hard to select from appearances.

Who, then, was he to doctor? who had been using the chloroform he could smell?

He turned inquiringly to Captain Diamond.

"Yonder is your patient," the latter explained, pointing to the bed.

"Of what fatal malady is she to be cured?" the physician jestingly asked.

Diamond drew him to the bedside. One of her arms lay outside the bed-clothing, and a slender, shapely hand, a round wrist, and large white lower-arm were revealed. Diamond raised her hand in one of his, and placing the fore finger of the other hand on her wrist, looked steadily at Doctor Rube, and slowly and distinctly enunciated:

"You are to amputate this arm at the wrist!"

Doctor Rube's blood seemed to turn to ice. With his physician's skill, as well as with his common-sense, he saw that there was no surgical necessity for the operation. No wound or injury or disease lurked in that delicately-made but beautiful hand that it should be separated from its companion arm. It would be just as sensible to cut off his (Doctor Rube's) head.

The first shock of horror at the idea of mutilating so lovely a creature past, the doctor looked at Diamond as though hoping to see him smiling over a good joke.

Captain Diamond did not smile. His face was set, cold and stern, and his eyes had a relentless stare. Seeing this, and remembering how he had been brought to the City of the Desert, the doctor again shivered. The glittering diamond caught his attention and seemed like a serpent's eye.

His companion had been in earnest; he was really desired to amputate the arm!

The long pause grew awkward to all, but as Doctor Rube remained silent, Diamond again spoke.

"I suppose you heard me?" he coldly said.

"Really, I don't believe I did," was the blunt reply.

"You are to amputate this arm at the wrist," the captain evenly said.

"For what purpose?"

"Simply because I wish it."

"There is no reason for it."

"I am the best judge of that."

"This hand," cried Doctor Rube, energetically, and feeling a strange thrill as he touched the white member, "is as sound as a piece of oak."

"Nevertheless, you are to amputate it."

"I'm not so sure of that," the doctor defiantly said, and never flinching before his captor.

"Give me good and substantial reasons for the operation and I'll perform it, but if you expect me to deprive a young and healthy person of a hand, when she is sleeping from the effects of a powerful narcotic, you are mistaken!"

"Possible?" said Diamond, lightly.

"Possible and true."

"Perhaps my man has not explained to you that your own future depends on your prompt obedience?"

"He has said so."

"And you refuse to obey?"

"I refuse to perform this diabolical deed."

"You can have your choice between obedience and death. I swear by all the saints in the calendar you shall die unless you perform the amputation!"

Doctor Rube folded his arms across his breast.

"Proceed with your killing," he stubbornly said.

Diamond's face did not change expression.

"Sit down," he calmly said, pointing to a chair.

The physician obeyed, but still looked at his captor with a defiant look. The latter no longer seemed like a well meaning student. Pale he was, but Rube saw in his face signs of a cruel and stubborn spirit, and the serpent's eye glittered balefully.

"I wish to call your attention to your situation," evenly observed Captain Diamond. "You are a prisoner, far from your friends and in a strange place. I use the last expression advisedly, for this city is a strange place. It is a kingdom by itself, and I am its ruler. My wish is law here. If I say to men, 'Go!' they obey; if I say, 'Come!' it is the same. My will is supreme; all who come to the City of the Desert must bow to it. Now, you are here, and what is more, you came at my bidding. You were brought to amputate the wrist of this girl. Why it is so, you need not ask; you have only to obey. But, what if you do not see fit to obey? Then, *you will die*. Perhaps you think of calling for help. It would be folly; there is not one person in this city who would not strike you dead at my bidding."

The speaker paused and looked fixedly at Doctor Rube, but the latter's face did not change.

"Once more, you may go on with your killing."

"I shall not kill you, for you will obey," Diamond calmly answered, caressing his gleaming breast-pin.

"Never!"

"You will obey!"

Doctor Rube looked at his companion in a rage. He had schooled himself to a professional composure, as physicians do, but before the icy calmness of Captain Diamond it all fled. He felt himself overmatched, and in his wrath would have leaped at the man's throat only that he feared to make a bad matter worse.

"We shall see," he therefore answered angrily.

"My dear sir, this is utter folly," said Diamond. "Why do you stand out because of so small a matter? What is this girl to you?"

"She is one of God's creatures, and, as such, deserving of human treatment. I am a man, and I will not knowingly do that which I see is intended as the first step in a crime."

"In a crime, sir?"

"So I said."

"What do you mean?"

"I hardly know, but it is clear that some game of villainy is behind this affair. Does this girl want her arm mutilated? Plainly not. What object have you in doing it? That's what I don't know, but it is clear you have some villainy afoot. I'll not be a party to it!"

Doctor Rube spoke sturdily, and though the icy face before him did not change, the cold eyes seemed to search his face intently.

"You presume too much," Diamond then said. "It is not for you to reflect, meditate or surmise; your place as a surgeon is to do your work and receive your pay. See here!"

He took from his pocket a silken purse, opened it and revealed closely-packed and large-sized golden coin inside.

"Five hundred dollars," he softly added. "Quite a fortune to a poor man. Besides which, you may have safe escort to Snicker's Gulch or to Santa Barbara."

"Put on another cipher and I still refuse," Doctor Rube unhesitatingly declared.

"If gold is so powerless," continued Diamond, without a change in his face or voice, "perhaps lead may induce you to do the work."

As he spoke, he drew a revolver and thrust its muzzle against the doctor's temple.

CHAPTER IV.

A PECULIAR SITUATION.

"Now," said Captain Diamond, coldly, "proceed with your work. Cut that arm off at the wrist or die!"

It wasn't a pleasant situation and many a thoroughly honest man would have yielded in order to save his own life, but Doctor Rube had a species of stubbornness which made him a hard man to coerce when once his mind was made up.

He had no thought of yielding to Diamond, but something unexpected had occurred while he stood there—something which led him to delay and seek for means to fall into the line which this new occurrence had made necessary.

Doctor Rube was young and as susceptible as the average man, but he had a strength of mind which had led him to forsake the East and its pleasant homes and plunge into the rough life of the West to better his financial condition. He was also thoroughly honest and upright, as has been seen by his refusing the tempting offer of Captain Diamond.

From the moment he first saw the young lady on the couch, he felt a profound interest in her. She was beautiful, and the man never yet lived who was indifferent to beauty. She was helpless, and this fact appealed to all the chivalry of the doctor's nature. On the whole, he felt a

sympathy and interest no other woman had ever aroused within him.

Once, near the end of their recorded conversation, the charming arm which he was to mutilate slipped from the spread and dangled in space. He raised and replaced it, and then feeling himself the guardian of her future in so far as his feeble powers—and they were surely feeble enough, just then—went, he retained her hand in his grasp.

It was at this moment that he received an unmistakable pressure from that hand; a pressure which showed that though her eyes were closed she was far from being unconscious.

Like lightning he grasped the state of affairs; by some means the opiate administered by Diamond, or his tools, had failed to do what was expected of it and the girl was all the while conscious and listening to what they said!

It was a startling discovery, but Doctor Rube managed to preserve his calmness. He looked Diamond in the face without a change of countenance, even while his active mind was trying to map out his line of conduct.

"Proceed with your work or die!" repeated Diamond.

There was another pressure on Doctor Rube's hand, and it gave him strength and boldness. He stole a glance at the fair face on the pillow. There was a quivering of the eyelids and he felt that the girl was listening with an intensity only to be felt by one in such dire peril.

He resolved to die before he would sever that warm, fairy hand from its place, but strategy must take the place of stubborn opposition.

"What good will it do you to kill me?" he demanded, looking Diamond calmly in the face.

"You hold a revolver, and I have no reason to doubt that a touch of your finger will send a bullet through my brain. But, what good will that do you? Will it accomplish for you the work which you wish done?"

"It will serve my second choice, which is to cover a stupid fool with four feet of earth. My first is to see you prove yourself a sensible man and go away from the City of the Desert with five hundred dollars in your pocket."

Doctor Rube appeared to meditate.

"Are you not afraid I shall return and bring a posse of officers with me?"

Diamond smiled carelessly.

"No. My dear sir, if you will do this I'll give you a thousand dollars. But you can't; no human being can find this place; you might as well try to find Aladdin's lamp. You would wander aimlessly on the desert for weeks and months, but you would not find this walled-in valley. It is an *ignis fatuus*, except to those who know its secrets."

Doctor Rube had relinquished the girl's hand after a pressure which he meant should say to her, "Trust in me," and stood pulling viciously at his beard. He had allowed his defiant expression to give way to one of deep gloom and his gaze was fixed on the serpent's eye.

"Sir," he suddenly said, "what is the object of this mysterious work?"

"That is not for you to know," was the cold reply.

"Perhaps you are asking me to become a party to a crime," he grumbled.

"Do you imagine you would be held blameable for what you did with a revolver at your head?"

"And this is unalterable?"

"Yes."

Diamond's voice was as cold and calm as ever, but Doctor Rube did not heed the inflection. He was resolved not to commit the villainous work marked out for him, but as the girl was conscious he was anxious to gain speech with her.

"Very well," he said, with sullen submission, "I will do your bidding, but it is under protest."

"That is understood," was the even answer.

Diamond made a gesture to Camp, who brought forward a stand, upon which was some object covered over with a cloth. He removed the latter, and a full set of surgical instruments lay exposed to the prisoner's practiced eyes.

"Proceed with your work," said Diamond, calmly.

"I cannot work with people around me. The presence of an ignorant person, professionally considered, is like a thorn in my flesh. I must work alone and be alone."

Diamond's gaze sought that of his prisoner. For the first time he showed feeling, but it was in the form of suspicion. Plainly, he did not look upon the idea with favor. It was a moment of great suspense to Doctor Rube, for the future of the girl seemed at stake, but he relied on the fact that they were so completely in the captain's power, a fact favorable for the accomplishment of the first part of his plan, but terribly unfavorable for the second part.

"You shall be left alone," said Diamond, after a pause, "but I warn you not to attempt any game upon me. By leaping through yonder window you would gain the street, but you could not go forty feet without being seized by my body-guard. Play me no tricks."

"There is no ground for your suspicions—" began the doctor, but he was interrupted.

"It is immaterial. As I said, you shall be

left alone, but the door will be left open so that I can observe all you do. I trust you will do well by yourself."

He touched his revolver significantly, nodded to Camp and the woman and all went out. The door was left open, as Diamond had said, but the trio retired to the further end of a long apartment where they seated themselves so that they could watch Doctor Rube and be easily watched in turn.

The latter was in the greatest dilemma of his life. He saw that the unknown girl was the victim of some strange and terrible persecution—terrible, because they would have deprived her of her hand while she slept a drugged sleep—and he longed to rescue her.

But how could he do it? What did his individual power amount to in a city where Diamond ruled every man and woman with an iron hand?

Making a pretense of being busy with his instruments, he bent over the girl.

"Do not stir," he said, in a subdued voice. "We are alone and can talk. I want light on this affair."

The eyelashes went up quickly and the eyes were unavailed. It seemed to Doctor Rube as though a pair of twin stars had flashed forth upon him. They were dark, bright, dazzling, glorious eyes, shining from the heaven of her face.

"Save me! save me!" she cried in a whisper, but far too loud for safety.

"Hush! be calm, be careful. It is our only hope. Tell me, what does this mean?"

"I do not know. I am the prisoner of this man. He captured me from a *hacienda* near Los Angeles and I awoke to find myself lying here before you. I have been drugged, I know. Imagine the horror of my awakening, when I heard you commanded to sever my hand from my arm. Oh! sir, save me! save me!"

She had caught his hand, holding it in that fair member of her own which Captain Diamond had doomed, and her touch, her looks and her voice went straight to Doctor Rube's heart. His professional dignity fled and he felt like throwing himself at her feet to swear eternal allegiance, and then to die fighting for her, if need be, like a cavalier of old.

Luckily, his matter-of-fact nature triumphed over his romantic one and he came down to solid business at once.

"Then you are a total stranger here?"

"Yes."

"And can give me no clew by which I can save you from this fate?"

"You can surely call for aid; you can summon the police," she said.

The reply showed that she was indeed ignorant, that she knew less of the City of the Desert than he did himself. It also threw the whole course of affairs for the future upon him, and he was ill fitted for the responsibility.

What could he do, without a friend, without even a weapon except those frail blades that lay in the case before him, but which were of no use in defense?

"Do you mean to say this Diamond is a stranger to you?" he asked, struck by a sudden thought.

"Diamond?" she repeated, inquiringly.

"The man with whom I talked," he explained.

"I never saw him before."

"Then why, in the name of all that's wonderful, does he desire me to cut off your hand?"

It was a puzzling question, and Doctor Rube could see no way in which to answer it. Men hate, men love, honorably or otherwise; but why should one of the sex wish to amputate a woman's hand?

"There's a deep plot somewhere," he thought, "and as I can see no possible way of escaping from the house, I am tempted to call in Diamond, confront him with his intended victim, and demand the reason for his singular conduct."

His silence, while thus thinking, seemed to make her nervous, for she suddenly shivered, and said:

"Diamond is looking this way. For Heaven's sake, save me!"

CHAPTER V.

A BOLD STROKE FOR FREEDOM.

DOCTOR RUBE had never felt himself more at fault than on this occasion. In what way could he save the girl? It would be useless to fling up the window and call for help, for the City of the Desert was not like other cities. He could not even face her enemies, and die in her defense, if he felt inclined to do any such romantic and unlike-the-nineteenth-century thing, unless he did it with a lancet for a sword.

What, then, could he do?

Like an echo to his mute question came the voice of the girl.

"I can see but one way," she said.

"And that?" said Doctor Rube, grasping at the straw.

"Do you see the door has a lock?"

"Yes."

"Very well; why not swing it together, turn the key, and escape from the window?"

The ring in her voice, telling as it did of heroism which he fully appreciated, thrilled him; but he did not forget the facts of the case.

"I fear we could not go ten rods. In this whole city we cannot number two friends."

"But is there any other hope?"

"I believe there is not," he admitted, adding in the sturdy, self-reliant tone common to him: "If you feel equal to the demands of the occasion, we will make the attempt."

"My bodily strength was never better, and I believe I may say the same of my mental courage."

Her bravery thrilled him again, even though he knew nearly all Western women possessed the same qualification. But few women of the West, or of any other section, possess the beauty of this one. Doctor Rube was not an extravagant man, but he felt that he could go through fire and water for her sake.

"We will make the attempt, desperate as it is. The only thing in our favor is that it is now night, and we may be able to dodge, rather than outrun, our pursuers."

The lack of weapons worried him, but the only thing he could find was a stout, silver-topped cane. This would make an excellent weapon when used as a club, and might be worth taking.

He accordingly laid it aside in the same cautious, disguised manner which had been used in carrying on the conversation, and then sauntered toward the door.

The eyes of the girl were watching Diamond, and she saw he was in turn watching the room, but it was probable he did not dream of anything so rash as what Doctor Rube contemplated.

The latter moved promptly when he moved at all. With a single motion he closed the door, and locked it with a second.

The momentous step was inevitably taken.

Hardly had this been done when the girl sprang from the couch. Doctor Rube saw that she was fully dressed, but it was in a color wholly unsuitable for their flight by night; but while he hesitated, she caught a dark shawl from a chair and was ready.

He shoved up the window, which was easily done, just as a rapping, loud and imperious, sounded at the door. He did not heed it; he was looking out to see what distance lay between them and the ground.

Luckily, it was but a few feet, and he sprang out, assisted the girl after him, and both stood on *terra firma*.

Doctor Rube realized the chances against them, and felt helpless, but he would not abate a particle of zeal on that account. The City of the Desert was silent and almost dark at that hour. There was no sound of revelry, such as is heard in the ordinary Western town until a late hour, and the only lights were the insignificant ones ranged at rare intervals along the street.

All this he took in at one glance, even while he grasped the girl's hand and darted away. It had been his intention to avoid the street, but as no other way seemed open, he made the most of what he could do, and they turned to the left and darted away.

Even then Doctor Rube remembered that in that direction lay the mountains, and there they could seek shelter if they succeeded in getting clear of the town.

They had gone further than the doctor dared hope when the first sounds of pursuit arose behind them. Doctor Rube recognized Camp's voice, and knew that from that time it was a flight for life, but he did not look around; all his attention was directed to watching for enemies at the front.

Only a few yards had been passed, however, when he saw a red light shoot upward in the sky, and there remain stationary. It did not go high enough to be mysterious, and he knew an ordinary red-glass lamp had been run up in some way to some place.

The fact gave him a theory, and he looked back to the building from which they had just escaped.

A similar light was visible there.

He glanced in other directions and saw red lights shooting up with unpleasant frequency, and he needed no further explanation.

This was a means possessed by the rulers of the city to quickly spread the alarm when there was occasion, and it followed that this telegraphing would speedily bring other foes into the streets.

How could they be avoided?

He was anxiously considering the question when some one darted out of the deeper shadows and stood in their path.

Doctor Rube instinctively raised his club, but it wavered as he recognized the form of the new comer.

It was the hunchback he had seen on the mountain—Iron-Armed Abe.

Even then the doctor remembered his avowed hatred for Captain Diamond, and wondered if there was a grain of hope; but before he could speak the hunchback had caught his arm.

"If it's life and liberty you desire, come with me," he quickly but coolly said. "Diamond's bloodhounds run fast, and they have the scent already."

It was no time for an elaborate consideration of his offer, and Doctor Rube instantaneously decided to take the chances.

"Lead on!" he briefly said—"lead on; and may Heaven bless you if you save this unfortunate girl!"

The hunchback was turning back to the shadows in silence, and Doctor Rube had taken a step in the same direction when the girl caught his arm.

"No, no!" she cried—"I dare not—I will not trust him! Let us not increase our peril—let us go this way!"

She was pointing up the street.

"Just as you say, my lady," the hunchback curtly answered. "I don't feel an irresistible craving for your society. If personal deformity is worse than mental deformity, return to Diamond—great King Diamond."

"Young woman—" began the doctor; but she interrupted him:

"No, no—I dare not!"

Doctor Rube neither wondered at nor blamed her, but he resolved to supply the courage she lacked.

The pursuers were near at hand; their footsteps sounded dully in the stillness of the night, but dangerously near; and he knew that to emerge from their cover was to meet with sure and speedy capture.

He arose equal to the emergency, and without another word caught her in his strong arms and ran after the receding hunchback.

"I am here!" he announced, as Iron-Armed Abe looked around. "Lead us to a place of safety, and count me your friend forever."

The hunchback laughed shortly, possibly in derision of the last words, and without any reply went on; but the doctor saw that he stepped with a lightness not to be supposed and ever looked keenly around as though to guard against unexpected enemies.

"Put me down," said the girl, calmly. "I have been childish, but as I now see the fact you need not carry me."

"I am sure we are acting for the best," he said, as he obeyed. "This is no time to explain who, but—"

He paused as they nearly ran upon Iron-Armed Abe, who had halted.

"Listen!" said the latter. "I am not sure we are safe."

Doctor Rube obeyed, holding protectingly to the girl. She was strangely calm, but he had already seen something of her brave nature. His interest had greatly increased and he was resolved to defend her at any risk.

The hunchback, standing like a statue, was peering into a narrow alley in front of them. His mis-shapen form was more bent than ever and looked repulsive, but Doctor Rube relied on his hatred for Diamond.

"Hush!"

Iron-Armed Abe spoke the single word and then even the others heard stealthy footsteps approaching. Rube felt a nervous contraction of the girl's form, but she did not speak.

Nearer came the footsteps, until the edge of the alley was reached. The moment was one of keen suspense. Doctor Rube felt that the prowler was to be feared and he was helpless to avert the peril. Could, or would, Iron-Armed Abe prevent an alarm?

Lower still the latter bent, but he suddenly arose, and Doctor Rube saw that some one was struggling in his arms. The girl gasped some inaudible speech, but he pressed her hand reassuringly.

The struggle was but brief. The hunchback lowered something to the ground and then turned about.

"We may go on," he calmly said.

Doctor Rube started, but the girl seemed paralyzed and stared at the dark heap on the ground; a heap which was startlingly like the form of a man.

"You have killed him!" she said in a husky whisper.

"What of it? Death is always abroad. He walks by our side and his skeleton hand is in what we eat and drink all the way through life. What matters it if this wretch is brought to an end a little sooner than we expected? King Diamond is minus another tool, that's all. Come on!"

He spoke somberly and deeply, turning away at the last words. The girl seemed unable to speak and Doctor Rube shivered as his foot rested in something wet and slippery near the body.

The Destroyer led the way through the alley with a cat-like step. At the other side was a narrow street which was dark and silent. The strange guide pointed to the east where one of the red lights was visible, but merely chuckling, turned to the west and went on with long steps.

Doctor Rube felt a confidence in him which he could not explain, though it was as in a man of power rather than of honor and fidelity. He had defied the minions of Diamond at the mountain and must be more than a creature of clay in the city.

The girl seemed to lack this confidence.

"We now have a chance to leave them all," she said, in a subdued voice. "In my opinion, this hideous creature is more to be dreaded than the others."

"It isn't likely he wishes to chop off your hand," the doctor said, with a touch of curt-ness.

"Do not misunderstand me, sir, for I am deeply grateful," said he, in a trembling voice, "but you have yourself said that no one in this city was to be trusted."

Before he could answer, their guide suddenly paused.

"Well," he said, calmly, "we are free for the time, and you may now form your plans. Of course you will be found, even here, in less than an hour."

"But are there not places where we may hide?"

The hunchback laughed shortly.

"You must be a stranger here, indeed. Know that this is a kingdom in itself and an undivided one. There is no rivalry or difference of opinion among the people. All are for King Diamond, first, last and always. He takes snuff and they sneeze; he goes past in kingly splendor and they, his chosen subjects, bend down their knees and lift their voices in praise and homage. They would kiss the hem of his gown if he wore one; they would lap his hand like the dogs they are if he thought the dogs worthy of such honor. They are his, body and soul, and he is theirs—as a master. Oh! great is King Diamond, the grand, the blessed, the revered. Praise ye him, all men; praise great King Diamond!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE HUNCHBACK STRIKES AGAIN.

It was a speech too long for the occasion, but neither Doctor Rube nor the girl thought of interrupting. Iron-Armed Abe spoke with a bitterness and show of deep hatred, though without excitement, which held them as mute and motionless listeners.

At the last word the strange man stretched his hand out toward Captain Diamond's residence and remained for a moment like a mis-shapen statue.

Then he suddenly aroused.

"Where are you two going?" he demanded.

"Anywhere, so long as we escape from this place," the doctor answered. "Our lives are sought by Diamond; this young lady is fleeing from deadly peril. You have aided us thus far, and if you will guide us safely from the city I will see you well rewarded."

The hunchback peered through the darkness at the girl.

"What is she to you?" he abruptly demanded.

"A woman in peril, sir."

Abe broke into a series of unmusical chuckles.

"Empty words, and an empty subject. I dare say you are fool enough to be chivalrous toward women, to think them angels and so on. Bah! you will know better when your head is gray. So much for women in general; for this one in particular, I bid you beware of her. Beware, beware!"

There was something so unnatural and evil in his manner that even Doctor Rube felt uneasy and the girl, clinging tightly to his arm, shivered like a leaf in the wind.

"This is not to the point," her defender somewhat curtly observed. "Will you guide me from the city?"

"Yes, but if you are ever sorry for it, don't blame me. Come on!"

Once more the hunchback turned and glided away. His companions followed at his heels and Doctor Rube tried in vain to imitate his secret manner. Once more the girl whispered her doubts of Abe's good intentions, but it was a choice between him and Diamond and the doctor avoided the known evil.

He soon had a chance to see how cunning was the strange guide. The system of telegraphing had aroused Diamond's tools all over the city and they were abroad in little parties seeking for the fugitives.

All these parties Iron-Armed Abe avoided with great skill, though often his means were small. Rube was not slow in paying him mute acknowledgment, for he knew he could not equal this caution and that they would have fared badly but for him.

Little conversation passed between them, for all knew it was dangerous, but Rube perceived that they were heading for the volcanic mountain at the head of the valley.

He remembered that the superstitious men with Camp had said that the Destroyer was a fiend who made his home in regions little loved by men and ascended to earth by way of the mountain. Lacking superstition, he wondered if it was possible for any human being to live in the crater and if they were being conducted there.

The houses had nearly all been passed when the guide made one of his periodical stops to avoid discovery, and as the trio crouched in the shadow of a building Abe suddenly grasped the doctor's arm.

"The voice! the voice!" he uttered, grimly.

Doctor Rube had not recognized it at first,

but he was not long at fault. There was a sound of hoofs and a horseman dashed to the side of those who had come afoot. The mounted man was addressed in familiar tones.

"Redspur, is it you?" demanded Diamond, quickly.

"Yes, captain."

"Have the Black Riders been summoned?"

"They have, sir. I am here for orders."

"Separate them into bands of six each and let the whole valley be searched thoroughly and at once. They must not escape from it. Do you hear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then go!"

The man had wheeled when Diamond again spoke.

"Redspur!"

"Captain!"

"See that no harm comes to the fugitives. Protect the man as carefully as the woman."

Redspur answered promptly and as promptly wheeled and dashed away. Rube had seen his dress dimly in the darkness and was in a measure prepared for the whispered words of the hunchback.

"He is the chief of the Black Riders."

Diamond and his man remained talking together, but a sudden and unpleasant interruption occurred.

The girl, standing behind Doctor Rube, had given every evidence of extreme fear. He had felt her shiver, and she had shrunk back as far into the corner as was possible, but this only served to cause a catastrophe.

A loose board went rattling to the ground, and Diamond and his man turned toward the place.

"What was that?" the captain asked quickly.

His subordinate lucidly answered that he didn't know.

"Well, I intend to know," Diamond declared.

"Get out your knife and revolver and we will look into this place."

Doctor Rube heard the words with regret which fell but little short of consternation. He and his friends could not retreat, and to remain was to meet sure discovery. Whether this meant capture was another question, but he reassuringly pressed the girl's hand and grasped his club the tighter.

Iron-Armed Abe, crouched like a panther for a leap, did not move and his opinions and intentions were wholly unknown.

Diamond and his man advanced with their weapons ready and another moment promised to give them a long step toward triumph, but affairs took an unexpected turn.

A dark object arose from the ground, there was a dull blow and a muffled groan, and the lesser villain fell at the feet of the hunchback, who had speedily and effectually disposed of him.

Doctor Rube, his fighting blood aroused by the neatness of the affair, raised his club for work, but before he could use it Abe had Diamond by the collar and was holding him firmly while a deep chuckle broke from him.

"Now, then, who triumphs?" he demanded.

"I tell you now, as I've told you before, King Diamond, I am your master. Squirm, if you will, and much good may it do you. I tell you I am your master!"

Diamond was struggling furiously in that strong hold, but it was a waste of strength. He was as helpless in his city and amid his scores of tools, as though he were a hundred miles away. Why he did not call for help is uncertain, but in his hot rage he may not have thought of it.

"Let us hold him as a hostage," suggested Doctor Rube, still supporting the girl.

"Better say, hold him as a venomous serpent who would bite if he could."

Iron-Armed Abe gnashed his teeth audibly and twisted the scarf which encircled Diamond's neck.

"Curse you! let go!" hissed the latter.

The hunchback took another turn.

"Death!" gasped Diamond, "you shall die for this!"

Abe laughed, and with a single motion of his strong arms forced him on his knees.

"If you'd had your way I'd have been dead long ago, King Diamond," he then said, "but I am the master, not you. Bah! I scorn you and your city and your people. With all your tools you are weaker than I. I am your master, I tell you. Dog, vile, infamous dog, I am your master!"

He twisted the scarf until Diamond's breath rattled in his throat like shot in a pouch. Death lurked near the chief of the desert-dwellers then, but he would not open his lips to beg for mercy. He knew this man in whose grasp he bent and strangled, but not for life even would he lower himself to him.

Doctor Rube looked on, wondering at such fierce hatred as the Destroyer showed, and expecting to see the captain killed in his own city, but Iron-Armed Abe suddenly relaxed his hold.

"Breathe again, villain," he said. "You know I won't kill you yet; you know your hour has not come. Breathe and live on, for I would see you when the time of my triumph comes. Breathe, dog—breathe!"

The words were like the hiss of a serpent in retreat, but Diamond was not slow to obey. He breathed, but he drank in fresh hatred with each breath.

"My day will come some time!" he doggedly said.

"Oh! of course; I've heard you say so before; I've heard you say so hundreds of times. You said it that night on White Pine Ridge, when first your plot took shape. I was doomed to die then, when she was doomed to be your victim. Ha! ha! you said then, 'Abe must die!' but Abe still lives. You have said the same thing many times since, but Abe was never stronger than to-day. Well have they called me the Iron-Armed, and well have they called me the Destroyer."

"Your day is about over."

"Ha! ha! hear him—hear King Diamond! Stand still, ye stars, for the ruler of this city speaks. Hear him! Great am I, King Diamond, and vast is my power. So my day is about over? Dog, I shall live to see the day when not one stone of this city will lie upon another. I shall live to see this valley a barren waste, and you, you, but clay!"

The captive stood in sullen silence, but Doctor Rube could no longer be an inactive figure in the scene. He had regretted each moment of this delay, for the flashing red lights seemed to tell that no time was to be lost, and he abruptly touched Abe's arm and said as much.

The strange man did not answer at once, but stood looking from one to another of the trio. Once a muttered word, which sounded much like "Idiot!" fell from his lips, but it was not certain to whom he applied it.

He suddenly stooped over the man he had struck down, and then, evidently satisfied with the examination, arose and pointed due north.

"Lead on!" he said to the doctor.

The latter did not need a second bidding. There was no sign of pursuers in that direction, and with the girl's arm within his own he started. She seemed gifted with new strength and moved readily, while he, feeling that she was the only worthy person near him, resolved to aid her to the utmost.

Iron-Armed Abe closely followed, retaining Diamond in captivity.

CHAPTER VII.

DOCTOR RUBE'S DISAPPOINTMENT.

THE composure with which Diamond submitted to be retained a prisoner in his own stronghold surprised Doctor Rube a good deal, but he did not know Iron-Armed Abe as well as the captain did; he did not know what great physical strength lurked in those mis-shapen arms, nor how useless it was to resist it.

Diamond knew the hunchback well. Old foes were they, with a romance and a tragedy a few years behind, and if it had been in the dark captain's nature to fear any one he would have turned pale at sight of Abe.

His great self-control enabled him to remain calm as they went on that night, but he inwardly cursed the chances of fate and prayed for a change in the situation.

"Where is this to end?" the girl lowly asked, shivering on the doctor's arm.

"Let us hope it will end well. I do not possess the gift of looking into the future, but I cannot believe the cause of right will be forgotten."

"I am dreadfully afraid."

"It is not strange, but you can rely on me, and I think it is the same with our uncouth guide."

"Ugh! he is the worst of all; I fear him more than Diamond, if possible. Ugh! my blood is like ice!"

"Be brave, my dear lady," said Doctor Rube, with more tenderness than he suspected.

"We are fast leaving the city behind."

"But what after that? Is it a long ride to a law-abiding town. Have you horses in waiting? Do you know the way to Los Angeles?"

These questions were asked with the feverish haste of one who questions as of herself, but they were more overpowering than any lawyer's keenest inquiries. Doctor Rube could not answer any one of these satisfactorily. He did not know the way to a law-abiding town, nor to Los Angeles; he did not even know where they were; the City of the Desert had never figured on a map of Arizona.

"We must trust to Iron-Armed Abe," he was obliged to say, "in which course something tells me we shall make no mistake. Beyond a doubt he has a fierce, wild temper, but he hates Diamond and will do his utmost to baffle him."

The girl seemed to make an effort to think the same, but it was hard to look upon Abe as a defender and deliverer. Under ordinary circumstances one may tutor their feelings as regards those made repulsive by inexorable nature, but the situation of the imperiled girl was not of the ordinary kind, and Abe's manner was even worse than his looks.

Still the quartette went on unmolested until the town was left behind.

There the guide paused and turned to Doctor Rube.

"Well, what now?" he surlily asked.

"Let us go on."

"Where?"

"Anywhere, so that we escape the tools of our prisoner. I tell you this girl is in great peril. We are none of us any too safe, but she is in more danger than the rest of us."

The hunchback turned his gaze upon her and chuckled several times in an unmusical way. It was as impossible to tell what he meant by it as to see any reason for such an outburst, but no one thought of finding fault.

"It's a pity about her," the stranger finally said; "a great pity. Your sympathy does you great and glorious honor, my good man, but in this selfish world it's just as well to bestow your care all on yourself. Yes, yes!"

"Will you lead us away?" Doctor Rube abruptly demanded, tormented by those protracted delays. "I would like your help, for which I am willing to pay well, but in any case we must go on. It is by far too dangerous to remain here."

"Come to the smoking mountain, then. There you will find a refuge, safety and a warm welcome."

The Destroyer wound up with his old chuckle and then, still retaining his hold on Diamond's neck, he ambled on in the darkness.

"Come to my home," the doctor heard him say, mockingly, to his prisoner. "She is not there, now, but you are welcome, just as you were at White Pine. Then, I thought there was no danger; now, I know there is none. Come, King Diamond, come!"

"Do your worst," said the captain defiantly.

"My worst? Not yet, great king; your time has not come. Some day you shall roast in the fire and flames of Smoky Mountain, but not yet, not yet. Death must come to you as it came to her, slowly, painfully, dreadfully. I will make you howl for mercy like a wolf."

"Never, demon, never; I defy you!"

"We shall see."

Conversation ceased between them and the party went on. There was no sign of pursuit and Doctor Rube found time to wonder what dark drama lay in the past of Diamond and the hunchback. Hatred such as existed between them had not sprung from any ordinary circumstance, he felt sure, but it was one which only death could end.

Again, what was this other drama in which he was taking part? What was Diamond's purpose with the rescued girl? Why did he wish to mutilate her arm?

The doctor felt himself environed by mystery, but it occurred to him that he could settle one point by learning the name of the girl. She had said her home was in, or near, Los Angeles, but more than that he did not know.

He had just turned to question her when there was a sudden rush through the darkness, a flying about of sand and horsemen loomed up on all sides. It needed but one glance to show Rube that they were of the Black Riders and he prepared for stout resistance.

Diamond and Iron-Armed Abe were invisible, separated from him by the Riders, but, regardless of odds, he laid about him stoutly with his club.

Once, twice, three times it fell, and not once without effect, and then the horsemen seemed to arouse like bees molested in their hive. They pressed closer to Doctor Rube, he was dashed to his knees by a heavy blow from some weapon and then knocked prostrate by a rearing horse; after which he had a vague impression that he was rolled over and over in the sand for several hours and trampled on by a countless army of Black Riders.

A good deal of this must have been mere fancy, for he came out of it without any broken bones, but at the end of an unknown time he found himself sitting on a horse and securely lashed in place, while sharp particles of sand were making free with his cuticle from head to foot.

Even then he noticed this minor trouble, but the greater part of his attention was devoted to trying to learn the state of affairs about him.

His eyes had been bandaged, and he was trying to catch some of the indistinct words which fell upon his ears—an attempt which was wholly unsuccessful.

What had occurred?

He asked himself the question again and again, but always unsatisfactorily. He believed he had fallen into the hands of the Black Riders—but what of the hunchback and the girl?

Somehow, he gained the idea that Abe had caught her up in his arms and taken to flight, but there was no groundwork except his imagination for the idea.

Half an hour passed in this manner. He had listened in vain for the voices of either of his former companions; all remained on the same mysterious basis before indicated.

Finally there was a stir among those nearest him, and his horse started as though yielding to a hand on his rein. Rube was pretty sure it wasn't one of his, for those useful members were tied behind him.

He had lost all idea as to the points of the compass, and so posed they were returning to

the town; but he listened in vain for some sound to show that the girl was with them. This effort succeeded no better than one to catch the sound of Diamond's voice.

The suspense became so unpleasant that he raised his voice to ask a few questions. He might have saved his breath, for no answer was returned.

Anon the hoofs of the horses began to ring audibly, and Doctor Rube could draw but one inference. They had reached border ground, and that only lay in the horseshoe line of hills.

Could it be they were leaving the valley? The question answered itself, for the fact that they were ascending soon became undeniable.

In the same grim silence they crossed the mountain and struck the sandy soil beyond. No more ringing of hoofs on the stones; they were on the desert.

They went on at an easy trot hour after hour.

Every attempt of the doctor to open conversation had been in vain. He would almost have thought himself alone had not such a thing been absurd.

At last they halted, the bandage was removed from his eyes and he was at liberty to use them to the utmost.

He was on the desert. As far as his eyes could reach, there was the same dead level, except that at the west a low, blue line marked the mountains which walled in the City of the Desert.

His companions were three men in the well-known uniforms of the Black Riders, dark, bronzed, taciturn-looking fellows. Diamond, Iron-armed Abe, and the girl had vanished like a dream.

He addressed the Riders; but no answer was returned. They might have been deaf and dumb, so far as he could tell. Food and drink were given him, and he was well used in general, but he was left in doubt and perplexity.

The sun of the following day was setting when the party, after a steady and wearisome journey, halted and bade Doctor Rube alight. He did so, and then the bandage was removed from his eyes.

Another moment, and the Black Riders swept away along the back track, and the doctor felt a thrill of uneasiness. Was he to be left alone on the desert with his hands bound behind him?

He turned and looked in the opposite direction. What he saw gave him a start of surprise. A mile away were the cabins, hill-encircled, which made up the town of Snicker's Gulch, from which, it will be remembered, he was originally kidnapped.

One more glance at the fast-receding Riders sufficed to convince him that, having returned him to his home, they were making all haste to get out of the way before they could be followed.

He resolved to prevent it; all that was manly and chivalrous in his nature arose to urge him on to rescue the unknown girl from her equally unknown fate, and settling down into a rapid run, he made for Snicker's Gulch without a pause.

His arrival created considerable commotion, as may well be supposed; but among such men it was not hard to find a party to pursue the Black Riders.

But, quicker than they, the darkness of a Southern evening was descending. When they rode from the village the Black Riders were invisible, and though they started on the trail, it was soon made indistinct by night.

We need not linger on what followed. On the desert, where trails cross and recross, or are entirely obliterated by the sand shifting under the wind like light snow, it is hard to follow a long trail.

Doctor Rube and his allies were baffled, and not more in finding the trail than in finding the mystic city. A little time the rough miners gave to the subject, and then they decided that Rube had but dreamed; that the City of the Desert, and all its people, were the delusive figures of a disordered mind.

He almost believed it himself when he heard from Los Angeles, and could learn nothing of a girl who had disappeared from there; when, after weeks of effort, and after throwing away money on various guides, he failed to find the mystic city.

"There is no such place!" declared every one except the doctor.

But he, remembering the eyes of the girl—her strangely lovely eyes, and her equally lovely face—could never forget her peril. As long as he lived he would remember.

CHAPTER VIII.

BOXFIELD'S ENCHANTRESS.

"My dear fellow, I want you for to-night."

"You have me now, I should say."

"True, but, to-night, there is to be a grand ball at the Aberdeen mansion. Belgium's capital is to get her beauty and chivalry together again and let them shake the light fantastic toe."

"With the old result?"

"No; I reckon 'the foe, they come, they come,' won't come at all unless it's to those who drink too much wine."

"Well, my dear Boxfield, I should be glad to go, and all that sort of thing, but I can't afford it. I came to San Francisco penniless, almost, and not a patient have I seen yet. I lack the clothes to figure at this gathering of the clans and must respectfully decline."

"No, you don't, Rube; no, you don't. I say you're going. Clothes be hanged! You and I used to manage that in our college days and I reckon we can now. You must go; to tell the truth, I have a particular reason."

"Ah! what's her name?"

"The dickens! you pick one up sharp, don't you? Who intimated there was a feminine pronoun in the case?"

"You can't deceive the eyes of a doctor, Ned."

"In this case, I don't want to; you shall be my father confessor, or whatever it's called, and I'll pour out my guilty secret. I am in love. Her name is Leora Templeton, and she is the prettiest girl in San Francisco. Moreover, she's as good as she is pretty and your humble servant means to marry her if he can."

Doctor Rube Leyden looked more gravely at his friend. He knew Boxfield to be the hero of a score of flirtations, but there was seriousness in his voice now, and, like a good friend, the doctor became interested.

"I shall be pleased to see the future Mrs. Boxfield," he said, kindly.

"I'm not so sure you'll see her when you see Leora Templeton, but I hope so. At present I am in suspense, and I'll be frank enough to admit she has given me no actual encouragement."

He went on at some length, dilating on the many excellent qualities of the young lady in question, and Doctor Rube's thoughts went back to an event in his life which had made a deep impression; his memory brought to light a face he could never forget, and he sighed without being aware of it.

A year had passed since his adventures at the City of the Desert, and, having beggared himself by vain attempts to again find the mountain-environed town, he had given up and removed to San Francisco, hoping in the bustle of the Pacific metropolis to forget the face of the unknown girl.

It seemed a vain hope. He saw the face, in his imagination, in his office and in his chamber, in street, theater and church, and always the marvelously lovely eyes appealed to him for help.

The uncertainty surrounding her fate made him moody and miserable. Had Diamond succeeded in his villainous purpose, or had Iron-Armed Abe aided her to escape? Again and again the question floated through his mind, but the answer never came, and, often, he awoke at night from a dream in which he saw her beautiful arm severed at the wrist.

The invitation of Ned Boxfield to attend the ball pleased him, and he resolved to go, hoping to drown his moody recollections in society.

Boxfield, by the way, was a young lawyer. He was gay and brilliant in a certain way, and as he was studying with an old attorney and always had plenty of pen-work to do, he fancied he was going along the road to fame at a gallop.

His aim was the Chief-justiceship of the United States Supreme Court and the target was a broad one.

The evening of the great event arrived, and the two young men wended their way to the Aberdeen mansion as buoyantly as though the elaborate dresses they wore were not borrowed plumage.

Doctor Rube found the scene a brilliant and interesting one, but as this is not a society story we need give no detailed description of it. He had come with more curiosity to see Boxfield's enchantress than anything else, and the chance was soon given him.

Conducted by the young lawyer, he was soon near the charmed circle of beauty.

"Miss Templeton, my friend, Dr. Leyden."

The latter acknowledged the introduction in his most graceful manner and then lifted his gaze to the young lady's face.

Then he stood in mute amazement; unless he was dreaming, mad or the victim of a strange delusion, he was face to face with the girl of his old, mysterious adventure. Form and face were alike, even to every feature, and surprise gave place to joy in the young doctor's mind.

She had escaped after all.

Instinctively his gaze fell to her hand—that hand he had once been ordered to amputate. It was there as nature and time had made it; the cruel knife had spared it.

"I am pleased to meet Mr. Boxfield's friend."

The words, spoken in the well-remembered tones of the girl, recalled the doctor to himself, and he looked into her smiling face. He believed he saw a mischievous look in her lovely eyes and did not doubt but that he was recognized in turn.

"I assure you the pleasure is mutual, Miss Templeton," he answered, quickly, "for you have scarcely ever been out of my thoughts since that eventful night. Pray, how did you escape?"

Her smile gave place to a puzzled look.

"How did I escape?" she slowly repeated.

"Yes, from Captain Diamond."

"Really, sir, I don't know what you mean," she answered, doubtfully but kindly. "I don't know any one named Captain Diamond; nor do I know to what you refer."

For a moment Doctor Rube was dumfounded, but he was both generous and quick-witted, and it flashed upon him that for some reason she desired that period in her past to remain a secret.

He made his excuses in due form, speaking of a deceptive resemblance, and peace and serenity were soon restored. His thoughts and attention were all on her, however, and he seized the first opportunity to talk with her in private.

In a curtained alcove they at last found themselves separated from the other revelers, but the young lady made no haste to refer to the past.

"Excuse my impatience," said Doctor Rube, "but I am all impatience to talk over the past—to know how you escaped from the City of the Desert."

Again the puzzled look crossed her face.

"I don't know what you mean," she said.

"Perhaps you would have known had I amputated this fair arm."

He ventured to touch her hand as he spoke, but she drew back as though alarmed and put the hand behind her.

"Is this a jest, Dr. Leyden?" she asked.

"It wasn't then," he answered, a good deal puzzled himself by that time: her manner was not such as might be expected under the circumstances.

"But I don't understand."

She knit her pretty brows in a way which indicated that if he hadn't been the friend of Ned Boxfield he might have found a small tempest raging around his ears.

For the first time Doctor Rube began to think he was in the same situation. The young lady was repudiating all knowledge of the Arizona affair, and as it suddenly flashed upon him that she was a San Francisco heiress he was compelled to see that it did look absurd to suppose she had been in the City of the Desert.

Could it be he was deceived by a resemblance?

Such a thing was possible, but if so, it was a remarkable one. Her form, her face—every feature—her voice, her motions—all were those of the unknown girl.

His perplexity increased, but politeness to a lady and a regard for Boxfield were not to be defied. He muttered some excuse, and had the satisfaction of seeing Miss Templeton smile and express her forgiveness, but he saw that she still looked at him with a shadow of fear in her lovely eyes, and it was a mutual relief when Boxfield reappeared.

Doctor Rube soon excused himself, but, securing a post favorable for observation, began to watch and study Miss Templeton. Every look and motion was weighed, and as a result he finally closed his teeth with a painful jar.

"I'll take my oath the two girls are one and the same. Now, then, what mystery have I stumbled upon?"

Even as he asked the question a tall, pale-faced man passed to the side of the lady and smilingly addressed her, at the same time nodding to Boxfield.

But Doctor Rube started back as though struck.

The pale-faced man was Captain Diamond!

CHAPTER IX.

THE STORY OF AN INHERITANCE.

It was no wonder that Doctor Rube was amazed, for the appearance of Diamond was more to be wondered at than was Miss Templeton's. The medical man had seen him in one base piece of work, and he had no doubt a hundred more lay at his door.

Yet, here he was in San Francisco, well-dressed, smiling, polite and perfectly at his ease. No shadow of crime walked by his side, and he might have been an exemplary member of society and have been less composed.

Strangest of all, he was bending over Miss Templeton and they were smiling at each other in a friendly way.

Doctor Rube stared in blank amazement for several seconds. In his imagination that old scene at the mansion in the City of the Desert arose before him. Once more the drugged girl lay on the bed and Captain Diamond, pointing downward, said:

"You are to amputate this arm at the wrist!"

How well-remembered were the words, the scene and its minutest particulars. And yet, the man who would have done this deed, and his marked victim, were now side by side and engaged in friendly conversation.

"Can it be?" wondered the doctor. "Am I again the victim of an optical illusion?"

He gained a position in front of the man and looked at him keenly, scrutinizing each feature and each peculiarity. Allowing himself ample time he finally arrived at a conclusion which nothing could shake. The man was Captain Diamond; he would swear to it. True, his dress

was different, but in no other way had he changed. Even the brilliant diamond pin, before mentioned, was in place on his breast.

"It is he; I will swear to it!" Doctor Rube muttered, "but what in the name of mystery is he doing with her? He don't seem anxious to sever her hand now, nor does she appear afraid he will do it. What mare's nest have I stumbled upon?"

The doctor knit his brows in a thoughtful scowl, but the mystery was too profound for his comprehension.

"By my life, I'll confront him!" he resolved, suddenly.

And then he made his way to where Boxfield was talking with Miss Templeton and Diamond and carelessly addressed the former.

Of course there was but one thing for Boxfield to do, and he did it unsuspiciously.

"Doctor Leyden, my friend, Mr. St. Jerome."

And then Mr. St. Jerome put out the white, blue-veined hand Doctor Rube so well remembered.

"I am pleased to meet you, doctor," he said, in the old, well-remembered voice.

Leyden was staggered; his cool assurance was both remarkable and, in its way, admirable.

"I believe we have met before," he stubbornly said.

"Have we?" and St. Jerome elevated his brows in surprise. "I do not recollect it. Pray, when and where was it?"

"One year ago, and at the City of the Desert," steadily answered Doctor Rube, his gaze never shifting from the face before him.

Into the face there crept a look of perplexity which was like that lately visible on Miss Templeton's.

"I—I don't exactly understand," he murmured.

"Can you expect me to forget Captain Diamond?" the doctor demanded.

One moment the perplexed look remained on St. Jerome's face, and then he smiled lightly.

"I'm afraid I must call for a new hand. I haven't the slightest idea what you are talking about. I don't remember ever seeing you before, while the expressions 'Captain Diamond' and 'The City of the Desert' are wholly vague, though I believe the last term is often applied to Salt Lake City."

"I do not refer to Salt Lake City, sir, as you are well aware, and as this lady is aware; but if you are willing to drop the matter, I am."

Doctor Rube spoke with a want of tact unusual to him, and greatly to Boxfield's horror. The other two persons seemed stunned by surprise, and before their emotion, real or feigned, vanished, the young lawyer had sprung into the gap with the zeal of one anxious to avert a cloud in the air which might resolve itself into a duel.

"Good gracious, what's all this talk about?" he demanded, with a forced laugh. "Rube, you idiot, how many more ghosts will you see to-night? I expect that you will soon imagine you see the god of the medical profession—what's his name?—Mephistopheles, Sophocles, Esculapius—ah! that's it!—and go to shake hands with him. Come, old fellow, these are friends of mine; tell them you mean no offense by your insane rambling."

Doctor Rube managed to smile in turn.

"I certainly intend no offense," he said. "Every person is his, or her, own master, or ought to be, and I don't wish to overturn the good old rule."

"That's all right then, and as they are about to dance the last time, let's all go in and do our devoir."

Boxfield's strategy broke up the hostile combination, and they met no more that night; but once on the street he backed Rube up against a building and raised his hat.

"There, let the wind cool your heated brow while I speculate what can be done to cure you of the whisky habit. Smith, Dosem and Cure—all each advertise a sure cure for fifty cents, stamps or currency. Take your choice, my dear Rube, but you must stop getting intoxicated."

"What rubbish is this?" the doctor morosely asked.

"Just what I want to know. You would have had a quarrel on your hands, with a duel as a wind-up, if I hadn't helped you out when you spoke so indiscreetly to St. Jerome."

"So he's a fighter, is he?"

"A fighter! Well, I should cordially despise the man who wouldn't pick up the gauntlet you flung him. Why, only for me you would have turned the scene of gayety into one of dire destruction. What in blazes did you mean by it?"

"Wait until my room is reached; I'll talk with you there. Not another word until then!"

And when they were comfortably settled in the room, and puffing their cigars, it was Doctor Rube who reopened the subject.

"What do you know of St. Jerome?" he abruptly asked.

"Nothing, except that he is a wealthy man of this city, and an old friend of Miss Templeton's."

"Humph! what do you know of her?"

"I know she is a wealthy lady of 'Frisco, an

old friend of St. Jerome's, and the fairest girl this side the divide."

"That's not what I'm getting at. Don't you know anything of her life? She is rich, you say. What is her property and where did she get it? and—"

"Hold on!" interrupted Boxfield. "She inherited her property from old Jacob Templeton, the miser millionaire. There wasn't much of a mystery about that. He died and she appeared, proved her claim and secured the lucre."

"She appeared, did she? From where?"

"Somewhere in the south of the State, where she had been living with an old lady as companion—"

"Los Angeles?"

"Can't say; the senior looked out for that."

"The senior?"

"The gentleman with whom I hope to go in partnership some day," exclaimed Boxfield, waving his hand. "I refer to Mr. Beesinger, attorney-at-law."

"Had he charge of the case?"

"Yes, he, or, to speak more properly, we did," the young lawyer answered, with dignity.

"Then do, unless you're a clod or stone, open your mouth in earnest and tell me all about it."

Boxfield indulged in a whistle.

"Curiosity of a woman, petulance of a ditto, inclination to make a mountain out of a molehill of a ditto. Why, old fellow, I'm surprised. But never mind; here's how!"

Boxfield tossed down a glass of wine, knocked the ashes from his cigar and began.

"Something like eight months ago I was one day sitting in the office of Mr. Beesinger. I had attended to the very learned work of sweeping the place, which I did as Coke and Blackstone would direct, and was awaiting my honorable partner elect, when the door opened and in walked a young lady.

"'Twas Miss Leora Templeton, and no sooner did my gaze rest upon her than I was a captive, wound around by Cupid's threads. I'll skip that, however. She wanted to see the learned Beesinger, but while she waited she was so good as to talk to the humble Boxfield. Not on business, for she did not suspect I was destined to be a partner. Our talk was more elevated, high-toned, and more calculated to make the arches of ages thunder in the style of the poem.

"Anon came Beesinger and I found she was the next of kin of Jacob Templeton, deceased miser millionaire, aforesaid. Naturally, she wanted the money he left. This, however, was not her first word on the subject; she had been corresponding with the learned Beesinger for some time. Usually, this would have been my work, but with so much money at stake my senior handled the ribbons. That's the way Miss Leora came on the scene, and when her identity was fully proven she took Jacob's millions."

Doctor Rube pulled his mustache with vicious thoughtfulness.

"There was no opposition, I suppose?"

"None, though the executors were a trifle crabbed at first."

"Why?"

"Curiosity, your name is R. Leyden, M. D. Well, my esteemed friend, you see it had been incorrectly reported that Leora was dead. She was in a railroad accident two years ago, and was said to have been lost. The accident was a mixed-up affair; some people escaped entirely, some were killed and burned in the cars, which ignited from a stove and were reduced to ashes, while still a third class were taken away by sympathetic residents of the vicinity and, being harbored by them, their fates were unknown for some days. Such was the fate of Leora Templeton, who sustained a severe shock; but on the authority of her traveling-companion—an old man—she was reported dead and burned in the cars."

"What was his object?"

"None. It was all due to poor eyesight. He saw some girl lying dead by the track, with one hand severed by the cruel accident, and thought it was she."

CHAPTER X.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

"WHAT!"

Doctor Rube shot the word upon an innocent world in a way which made Mr. Boxfield jump, rap his knuckles and drop his cigar. When he had recovered it he looked reproachfully at the doctor.

"Now what have I done?" he groaned.

"Did you say her hand was cut off?"

"No, sir, for I was not on the scene. Old Tuttle said so, basing his assertion on the treacherous evidence of his eyes. You see, to be explicit, he crawled from the debris after the grand smash-up, and looking a short distance away, saw what he took to be Leora Templeton. She was dead, mutilated as I said, and still held in the grasp of the twisted timbers. The sight was so terrible that the old man fainted. When he recovered he found he had been dragged to a place of safety by some one,

but the girl with the severed hand—perhaps I should say without it—had been cremated in the afore-mentioned fire which consumed the cars. Result: old Tuttle spread the story that Leora Templeton had died as aforesaid."

"Well?" questioned Rube sharply.

"It was well, because it was not true."

"I see. Go on."

"Nothing more was seen or heard of Miss Templeton until Beesinger advertised for next of kin of Jacob Templeton, deceased miser millionaire. Then she answered the ad., Beesinger sent for her, and she received her property."

"How long was this after the railroad accident?"

"Something like a year."

"During which time she had been—where?"

"In the mountains. She received a severe nervous shock and was conveyed to the house of a native, as somebody calls it, where she recuperated. Being offered light work there, she remained, being poor, for some time."

"And her hand was not severed?"

"No."

"Tuttle imagined it all?"

"Either that or he tried to beat Munchausen."

Doctor Rube puffed steadily away at his cigar and as steadily stared at the wall. Upon what sort of a tangle had he chanced? In what way did this story fit into his own experience at the City of the Desert?

Going back to that period in his life, he could not but regard it as suspicious that he had been asked to amputate Miss Templeton's arm.

"There is a villainous plot somewhere," he thought, with a frown.

"Now then, my beloved Esculapius," said Boxfield, after a pause, "allow me to ask what nigger you scented in the brush-heap?"

It was no more than a fair question, after his own elaborate explanation, but Doctor Rube was not so ready to divulge. Heretofore, Boxfield had shared his confidence fully, but it occurred to him that a lover of Miss Templeton was not the person to judge fairly in the matter.

"Naturally he would go straight to the girl," thought the doctor, "and as it is clear she is now in league with Diamond, bought over by the glitter of money, she must be kept in ignorance if justice is to triumph."

Just what he meant by the last few wild words he did not know. He had not yet formed definite plans for hurling Diamond and Miss Templeton to ruin, or for proclaiming their guilt from the house-tops, as a lofty saying goes, but he did think the honors of the latter not based on justice and right.

"Come, do we sleep?" Boxfield finally asked, impatiently, as Rube did not answer.

"St. Jerome—what of him? You said he was an old friend of Miss Templeton's."

"We shall have to take their words for it," was the careless reply. "Of St. Jerome I really know little. He came to 'Frisco six or eight months ago, and as he had formerly been an acquaintance of Leora's, he has since been known as such."

"Rather a strange story."

"Strange? In what way?"

"The dead seldom rise from their graves."

"Bah! Supposing you refer to old Tuttle's version of the railroad accident, 'twas all in his eyes. The unfortunate young woman whose hand was severed, and who was subsequently cremated in the train fire, was not Leora Templeton. This stern fact robs the situation of the envenomed fangs of lurid mystery."

Boxfield spoke with the carelessness of one wholly at ease, mentally and otherwise, and Doctor Rube was glad it was so; but to the doctor's mind came a recollection of that scene in the City of the Desert.

Why had he been ordered to amputate the hand of the girl?

To him, an outline of an answer was not difficult to find. The real Leora Templeton died in the railroad accident as reported, having first been robbed of her hand and then burned among the cars. Secondly, the present holder of the name was an impostor who was making her resemblance useful.

The City of the Desert episode was not clear, but at that moment it looked as though the counterfeit Leora had at first been a reluctant *particeps criminis* only to abandon her position and become Diamond's ally when due, or undue, arguments or threats were used.

At first, too, it had plainly been deemed necessary to sever her hand to make her look like the real Leora, but an after-thought had made them decide on the bolder scheme of sparing the hand and giving the lie to former reports.

"A bold scheme which has thus far been successful," Doctor Rube thought; "but from this hour I am in the way."

Yes; already he had decided to act a decisive part. A great wrong had been done; the cunning scheme of an adventurer had put an adventuress in the place of the lawful Templeton heir, and he meant to do what he could to right the wronged.

Luckily, Boxfield failed to give the matter the attention one would naturally expect, hav-

ing a profound confidence in the honor of Miss Templeton, and after nearly falling asleep he aroused and went to his own quarters.

We will not dwell on Doctor Rube's thoughts that night; enough that he carried out a fixed plan and visited A. Beesinger, attorney-at-law, the following day at an hour when he knew Boxfield would be out.

The lawyer was now past sixty, in point of years, but he was hale and hearty, and a red face made a marked contrast to an eccentric line of white hair which, disdaining to grow on the top of his head, crept around each side from the back and eventually met under the chin like a dog-collar. His lips and cheeks were clean-shaven.

Mr. Beesinger was very polite until the caller asked for the address of Abram Tuttle. Then his spectacles were readjusted and he looked fixedly at the younger man.

"Allow me to ask why you come to me for this information?" he crustily said.

"Simply because I thought you might give it."

"I've heard the name of Tuttle until I am disgusted," Mr. Beesinger declared. "For a man who is in his dotage he is much sought after. Perhaps you aspire to figure in the Templeton case?"

"I trust that case will bear scrutiny," retorted the doctor.

"So it will, sir; so it will. Bring your guns to bear as soon as you wish."

"Pardon me, sir, but as I have not expressed any intention of taking part in the case it seems to me you are over-hasty in defending it."

"Oh! I know what's wanted when old Tuttle is inquired for," Beesinger explained, and he glared at his visitor until his red face grew of a still deeper hue.

"I have heard this Templeton case mentioned, and it seems to me to be a somewhat singular one."

"Oh! it does, does it?" the learned gentleman sarcastically inquired. "Well, what have I to do about it?"

"At present your share in the case is not wholly clear, but time may make it so. You show a disposition to strangle inquiry in the case."

"Nonsense!" said the lawyer, brusquely. "You are as crazy as the executors. You shall have Tuttle's address. He lives a mile or two out of town—at this place. Hope you'll enjoy your call!"

Tossing a card to his visitor, Mr. Beesinger smiled in what seemed to be a malicious manner, turned to his desk and resumed work.

Doctor Rube, finding he had really secured what purported to be Abram Tuttle's address, dodged Boxfield on the street and went to his own office for meditation.

Naturally, he felt a good deal of interest in the Templeton case; chance had made him an actor therein, and it would have been a clog who could have turned from it after what had occurred at the City of the Desert.

"I am not over-weighted with patients," thought the doctor, "and as Diamond saw fit to mix me into this affair, perhaps I'll stay in longer than he wishes. I'll look into the matter a trifle, and if I find it really suspicious I'll make known what occurred at the secret city. Suspicious? Of course it's that, and old Beesinger was in the plot. He was very much afraid I would find Tuttle and get something out of him. So I will, if he can be made to speak. This false heiress, aided by Diamond, *al as* St. Jerome, has stolen a fortune and must be made to surrender it."

Doctor Rube felt a little thrill of hesitation as he remembered the position the girl had always held in his esteem until the previous night. From the time when he saw her lying helplessly on the bed, and had been ordered to sever her hand, she had inspired a deep interest which had nearly developed into a warmer feeling.

"But she's as treacherous as every one else," growled the doctor, as he pitched his cigar away, "and the prospect of money and fashion's glitter was not to be resisted. She has seen fit to join her fortune with Diamond; now, she must take the consequences."

Thus it was that he went that evening to the address given by Beesinger to see Abram Tuttle. He accounted for his zeal in the case by muttering about the demands of justice, but fairness compels us to doubt if he would have been so bitter against Miss Templeton if she had not disowned him and taken Diamond for her right-hand man.

Consequently, jealousy was at the bottom of the investigation in the Templeton case.

CHAPTER XI.

THE EVENTS OF A NIGHT.

THE place mentioned as the residence of Abram Tuttle was between San Francisco and San Jose, and Doctor Rube decided to go by water. For this journey he would have liked Boxfield for a companion had not events shown the latter arrayed against him in the case.

As a result, Rube went alone.

He pulled over just after sunset and found Tuttle at a small cabin as he had been informed

he would, but there was nothing encouraging about the meeting.

Half an hour sufficed to show him that what Tuttle once knew about the affair had slipped away on the inclined plane of old age. As Beesinger had declared, the man was in his dotage and nothing of importance could be obtained from him. Like all old people similarly afflicted, he lived in the distant past and his recollections of the recent railroad accident were but vague.

One thing only was certain; he was sure he had thought that he saw Leora Templeton lying dead on that occasion with one hand severed from her arm.

Beyond that he repeatedly contradicted himself.

The other occupants of the cabin were Tuttle's married daughter and her twelve-year-old son, both of whom took an interest in the matter; and Doctor Rube could not doubt that, whatever was the Templeton plot, no share of the ill-gotten money had come to the Tuttles.

The condition of the old man was annoying, even while it was not open to fault-finding, and the doctor finally arose abruptly.

"It's going to rain, mister," said the boy. "The fog is settlin', and at this time o' year rain comes down easy."

At any other time Doctor Rube might have admired the precocity of the youth who, like the majority of other youth, was repeating what he had heard some adult say, but not feeling in that mood just then he walked to the window and looked out.

The boy had told the truth about the fog. It was steadily settling, and he knew he ought to return to San Francisco as soon as possible, but he stood gazing thoughtfully into the darkness.

He was so discouraged by Tuttle's condition that he was tempted to abandon the whole affair, but his injured pride still tempted him to work against the schemers.

He was still gazing in an absent-minded way when something arose above the window-sill, coming between him and the fog, and he had a momentary view of a broad, coarse face hedged in by bushy whiskers and hair, and a broad hat; but as a pair of small, furtive eyes met his, the head dropped and the man was gone.

An evil-looking fellow he had been, but just then Doctor Rube had no doubt but that he was the father of the boy. In any case he did not see wherein he was interested in the affair.

Turning away from the window he paused to thank the woman for her kindness, and when she offered him some wine as a "protection against the weather," to drink; and then he left the house and the old man and made his way toward where he had secured his boat.

The fog hung thickly over the water, but no rain had yet fallen, and, in any case, the elements would not rage to any extent in that inland spot.

Doctor Rube embarked, and pulled away. He was a fair oarsman, and settling down to his work, he began the return to San Francisco.

In coming up he had hugged the western shore, but after going for half a mile, he aroused from thought, and looking around, saw that he had parted company from the desired stretch of land.

Resting on his oars he made this out by diligent peering about; but just as he was about to resume work he was met by a new sound on the water. The creaking of oars was plainly audible, and he looked toward the rear.

Then, as abruptly as the sound had been heard, a boat became visible in the fog and darkness, and he saw a single boatman steadily advancing.

"I'll find out where I am," thought the doctor, who then awaited his neighbor's advance.

The latter came down without once looking over his shoulder; but when a few yards away, Doctor Rube deemed it expedient to attract his attention.

"Boat ahoy!"

The motion of the oars suddenly ceased, the boat drifted free, and the oarsman turned his head slowly.

The motion gave the doctor a little surprise, for even by this indistinct view he recognized the same man whom he had seen peering into the window.

For a moment there was mutual silence and inactivity, and the two men looked at each other steadily. Then the unknown dipped his oars again, and began moving on down the water.

The movement aroused Doctor Rube.

"Ahoy, friend!" he cried; "wait a moment, if you will. I am going your way, but I am a little confused in the fog. Can you set me right?"

There was a perceptible hesitation on the part of the other man, and then he again ceased rowing.

"Pull this way," he said, gruffly.

The voice was not an agreeable one; but the doctor obeyed, and soon laid his boat beside the other craft.

"Wharaway?" the unknown asked.

"San Francisco."

"Frisco? Wa-al, thet thar is my rowt, too. Did ye say yer wanted ter pay me a dollar ter row ye down?"

The speaker thrust forward his shaggy head, and leered in a way which did not improve him. Doctor Rube only pronounced him a fit subject for the hangman; but accustomed to seeing rough Western men, swallowed his instinctive dislike.

"I'd give the dollar willingly, but my boat is a hired one, and must go back to San Francisco."

"Let her trail. Get in here, an' cling ter ther gunwale."

The doctor hesitated for a moment, and decided to accept. The mingled fog and darkness made voyaging so difficult that he had little taste for it, and the waterman looked strong and rugged enough for the work.

"A dark night, friend," he observed, as he gained the new position, and the man resumed work.

"I've see'd darker," was the surly reply.

"Do you live beside the water?"

"I never died yit."

"Astonishing! One more question, if you please. What's your name?"

"Ben Bolter is ther sort. I ain't ashamed on't."

"Certainly not. Do you live hereabouts?"

"Stranger, I'm hired ter pull you ter 'Frisco. Ef thar is anything else I kin do fur you, name it fur ducats."

"Sensible to the last, ain't you? But never mind; I don't care to talk."

Both men relapsed into silence. Bolter pulled on through the night and Doctor Rube devoted most of his time to thought, though he did not fail to keep an eye on his pilot. The fellow looked like a murderer let loose, and it would be no loss of time to look his way now and then.

He finally paused and peered sharply ahead.

"Well?" questioned his employer.

"I ain't sure it is right. It's durned black, pard, an' I ain't sure I'm on ther right course. A pocket compass would lose ther course in this fog."

"Nonsense! One would think we were off-coast. An accomplished boatman like you can scarcely lose his reckoning."

"Sech things has happened afore an' may happen ag'in," was the sullen reply; but Mr. Bolter resumed work and the boats progressed at fair speed.

Doctor Rube had centered all his attention on the present time, but he was so ill-prepared that when they unexpectedly ran upon a sand-bar he nearly lost his balance.

"We are hyar," Bolter gravely announced.

The doctor withheld his wrath.

"What are we to do?" he asked.

"Get out an' shove her off was the unconcerned reply."

There seemed no help for it and they slipped over the gunwale on opposite sides. Bolter made an examination and announced that the boat must go back. They stood knee-deep in water, and when the pilot directed Doctor Rube how to use his strength there was no difficulty in so doing.

Mr. Bolter, however, did not seem very anxious to carry out his plans. No sooner had he directed his companion's attention to his work than he stood erect himself and quickly raised one of the oars.

There was a wild, startling gleam in his eyes, though the darkness hid it, and his movements were very suspicious, had Doctor Rube seen them.

Up went the oar, and in the air became momentarily motionless; then down it whistled, while Ben Bolter's gleaming eyes were fixed on the head dimly visible as the doctor tugged at the boat.

A dull thud, a groan and a splash followed, and then the would-be assassin leaped into the boat and grasped his victim.

He drew the dark object into the craft, but it lay motionless, with a pale face upturned to the lowering sky. If Doctor Rube had not received his last injury, he was certainly off the field for the time.

Bolter satisfied himself that he was unconscious and then deliberately proceeded to look into the condition of his pockets. In this line his discoveries were not very gratifying, for the doctor was not a rich man.

"A silver watch, knife, bunch of keys an' a cigar. Shoot him, he makes a poor victim, though ef I kin find whar his office is I may be able ter use ther keys ter advantage. This is all, so ther quack goes ter feed ther fishes now."

The scoundrel stowed his dishonest gains away in his pocket and punched Doctor Rube in the ribs.

"Physician, heal yerself," he said, with a chuckle.

But Doctor Rube lay with his pale face upturned to the sky and made no answer. The cruel blade of the oar had dashed life from his body, for the time or forever, and he was at the mercy of this bird of prey.

The boats remained in place, the foremost clinging to the sand-bar.

Bolter lost little more time. Raising his victim by his shoulders he dragged him to the stern, listened to see that no one else was near and then cast him into the water.

A sullen splash followed and the body vanished from view. Bolter did not try to trace it, but, cutting the second boat loose, he shoved his own clear of the bar and rowed on toward San Francisco.

Doctor Rube was left to the mercy of the waves.

CHAPTER XII.

NOROLA.

HALF an hour after the doctor was thus cast into the water, a man was standing on the eastern shore of the same arm of the ocean and, shading his eyes with his hand as though the sun was shining, peering into the darkness.

"Queer, mighty queer," he muttered. "Ther gal should be back afore now. What kin keep her? Et may be all right, but I hev my doubts. Norola! Norola!"

The call floated off over the water, but there was no reply. The man began pacing to and fro on the wet sand, ever and anon glancing out into the fog.

He was a stout, middle-aged man, and one would have said he was either a fisherman or sailor. Whatever he was, he was sincerely anxious in regard to something.

Suddenly, however, he started and bent forward. To his hearing plainly came the sound of oars, and he went so near the water's edge that it lapped his feet.

"Norola!"

"Coming!" answered a clear voice; and then, almost like a ghostly craft, a boat appeared in the fog and sped toward the shore.

It seemed to contain but one occupant and that a young woman, but she wielded the blades with strength and skill and was plainly no novice.

"I thought ye'd got lost in ther fog," the man explained, rubbing his hands. "You've b'en an uncommon long time—"

"And I've done a good deal of business," father Griff, the girl interrupted, as she ran her boat to the shore. "I have a cargo here; come and look at it."

Griff obeyed, and then started back.

"A man!" he exclaimed.

"Yes—and a wet one. The water struck in. He's unconscious, is my passenger. Let's get him ashore, father Griff."

"Men is men," remarked the person addressed; "an' most on 'em is snakes in the grass. I have my doubts about 'em. What's this 'un?"

"Fished him out of the deep," answered Norola. "How came he there I don't know; but you know our duty, father Griff. Lift him ashore!"

"I have my doubts—"

"Certainly you have, my respected parent. You always did have 'em. They're like whooping-cough and snakes in the boots—not to be got rid of, you know. But you are a humane man, father Griff, and this drowned man goes to our cabin—understand?"

"I see I've got ter obey, whether or no. I'll do it, though I have my doubts—"

His voice died away in an indistinct murmur, as he bent over the unconscious man in the boat.

They carried him ashore, the boat was secured, and then Griff swung him over his shoulder.

"Lead the way," he directed, "an' tell The Wild that we're comin'. I have my doubts about introducin' them, but ef you say so—Oh! the gal is gone!"

Norola had indeed disappeared in the darkness, as Griff staggered on alone with his burden—stout and willing in reality, but from a chronic habit, muttering about his doubts at every step.

At the end of a few yards he reached a cabin which stood among the rocks almost like an eagle's nest on a crag. The door opened for him, and he entered and laid his burden on the floor.

Norola was very busy with preparations for the unconscious man's comfort, but another woman advanced to the middle of the room.

She was in more than one way of remarkable appearance. Her dress was novel, uncouth and almost shapeless; her long hair was tangled and flying at will, partially concealing a thin, restless face and sharp, staring eyes.

"Why do you bring the martyrs here?" she fiercely demanded, addressing Griff.

"I don't," he soothingly replied. "You mistake his caliber, Wild. He ain't no martir, but a drowned man. He's a toiler from ther sea, an' a relic cast from ther maw o' ther great deep."

"What rubbish is this—"

"They call it a man," was the meek reply.

The Wild stamped her foot.

"Fools, all!" she declared. "You are the worst of all, Griff. Why do you bring a stranger to your happy home? He is young and handsome, and you have a daughter. Beware, Griff—beware! The rattlesnake's sting is

not more to be dreaded than the oily tongue of man!"

"I am aware that they're a pernicious lot," said Griff, meekly. "Ef I'd b'en consulted when I was borned I'd hev b'en suthin' else, but fate is inexorable. Ez fur this critter hyar, thar ain't much harm in him now, an' I hev my doubts ef he ever breathes ag'in."

"Clear away the gossip's club," said the cheery voice of Norola. "Miss Wild, do sit down and be comfortable. Father Griff, you know your duty."

"It's ter put ther drowned man in bed an' in-still life inter him, I s'pose. Wal, I'll do it, though I hev my doubts."

The patient was put in bed, and then Griff went to work with the zeal and skill of one who means to do his duty and knows the means. Norola acted as assistant, while The Wild returned to her seat in the corner and began to braid her disheveled hair in an attempt to make a toilet.

It was an hour later when the patient opened his eyes. His gaze encountered the face of Norola, and he lay staring in mingled wonder, stupidity and amazement. The sight was unexpected and the face was bright and pretty. He raised his hand and brushed his eyes.

"I don't understand," he said, frowning.

"Why, you went in to swim, and you overdid the matter and brought up drowned," she briskly explained.

He started to his elbow.

"Hal! where's Ben Bolter?" he demanded.

"He's bolted, for all I know. His card ain't on our table. If he's your friend, he owes you an apology."

"He owes me more than that, strange I was a fool to trust him. I see; he came from Diamond and it was their purpose to kill me, but I'm worth ten dead men yet. I'll return to San Francisco and hunt them down. I'll lay bare their plots and have vengeance."

"Ay, vengeance, vengeance!" cried the elder woman, as she bounded from her chair. "Let loose the forked lightning and blast the world. Vengeance! Ha! ha! ha!"

Clasping her hands above her head she laughed shrilly, and not a little to the patient's surprise, but Griff moved to his side.

"Never mind her; she's The Wild, you know," he explained. "Better lay down an' keep shady; I hev my doubts ef sech a scene will do you any good."

But the patient—the reader has already recognized Doctor Rube—was not in a hurry. Except for a slight dizziness he felt as well as ever, and he set to work to drive that away. He had a huge bunch on the back of his head where Ben Bolter's oar had struck him, but as there was no injury to the skull he regarded it as trifling.

The hurt was cared for as well as possible during which time he learned something of his situation. Griff was a fisherman and Norola his daughter. The latter, being out in her boat, had seen a man floating in the water, buoyed up by some drift-wood, and had rescued him in a matter-of-fact way, being no weak-armed belle of society.

For all this Doctor Rube was duly grateful and, looking at Norola's fair face, he felt a good deal of admiration, also. She had brown cheeks and her hands were none too soft, but she had a bright face, with regular features, and might well have laid claim to beauty of a sensible kind.

Having decided to remain at Griff's cabin over night, Doctor Rube composed himself and fell asleep. He dreamed of murderers of various kinds, of people who were hunting for a fortune and none too scrupulous as to means; but he awoke in the morning to find himself safe.

Norola was preparing breakfast, The Wild sat in one corner and wound her fingers again and again in her hair, while Griff mended a net which was destined to bring him his daily bread.

Doctor Rube arose and found himself as well as ever. Ben Bolter had mangled his work and merely managed to show his hand, and the doctor felt rather glad it was so, even while he internally vowed vengeance.

He learned more of his present companions while he waited for breakfast, but there seemed little that was new in the lives of Griff and his daughter. Theirs had been placid lives since the girl could remember, but the fisherman did not hesitate to acknowledge he had once seen wilder days and mixed in wilder scenes.

The woman he eccentrically called "The Wild" was one of the world's waifs. She had come to Griff's cabin four years before, and in the same condition in which Rube saw her. She was shattered in intellect, but harmless, and the worthy fisherman had given her shelter and food.

"She ain't capable o' gratitude, Ther Wild ain't," he explained, "but I b'lieve in helpin' a blind hoss ter corn. Ef I was infarm mentally, I'd be duly grateful fur help even ef I didn't realize it."

Before Doctor Rube had time to study on the wisdom of the last observation, The Wild came to his side and grasped his arm in her bony fingers.

"Have you seen him?" she demanded. "Have you seen Lucifer?"

"No, my good woman," he gently replied, meeting her wild glances in a manner he meant to be composing.

"Where can he be? No one has seen him for a long time. What evil wind has blown him away? Oh! my Lucifer, the proud, the noble and the gay! I think he's a prince in disguise, or a fallen star, or a diamond from the queen's crown. Kind sir, have you seen Lucifer?"

Eyes and voice softened, but Doctor Rube shook his head. He began to feel an interest in her case, however, and he gave his professional attention to it. The result was not promising, for had there been a million dollars offered as the payment for her cure he would have had little hope of winning it.

She seemed hopelessly deranged.

Griff agreed to row his guest down to San Francisco, and after breakfast the start was made. They left The Wild in the corner, braiding her hair and muttering of Lucifer, but Norola stood in the door and watched them away; and as Doctor Rube looked back he could not resist the impulse of gallantry which made him raise his hat.

Daughter of humble life though she was, she was far prettier than many a money king's child, and it was not likely the doctor would soon forget her.

CHAPTER XIII.

A FRESH PUZZLE.

DOCTOR RUBE reached San Francisco without further adventure. The last half of the voyage was made in silence, for when Griff ceased to be interesting, the doctor left him to his work and dropped into thought.

How was he to begin work on the Templeton case?

He no longer inquired of himself if he was to begin, but he was studying the ways and means. He was confident he owed the attempt on his life to Diamond. The attack had been deliberate; he had seen Ben Bolter at the Tuttle cabin, and he had then followed him; and there could be no room to doubt that he had been sent for that purpose.

So reasoned the doctor, and all his wrath arose against Diamond and the *soi-disant* Leora Templeton. He remembered the latter with a twinge of pain. He had become deeply interested in her at the City of the Desert, and since then he had thought of her by day and dreamed of her by night.

It is hard to stamp out such a fancy in the twinkling of an eye, and he found deep regret mingled with his wrath; but he was determined to be harsh, revengeful and destructive.

Everything except the ways and means was settled by the time he reached the end of his water journey. There he bade Griff good-day, but not for a very long time. Ben Bolter had robbed him, but the doctor silently vowed that he would reward the fisherman well at no distant day.

On reaching the city he lost no time in going to his room, and there he was soon joined by Ned Boxfield.

"Hallo! Esculapius is in, I see," quoth he. "Not quite so great a rush of patients as usual, I suppose."

"Gibe on, villain; we'll see when your first client appears after you leave Beesinger!" retorted Rube.

"Don't intend to leave him; think it'll be more to my benefit to absorb the old business. My learned senior is getting to be an old man, and if he don't shake the bottle soon the bottle will shake him. Then lo! the humble junior will appear, and rattle around in the senior's shoes. But how's your mental condition?"

"Fair. Why?"

"I'm the bearer of the olive branch. Miss Leora bids me say to 'that eccentric doctor' that she would be pleased to have him call with his friend, Mr. E. Boxfield. Of course the junior is pleased to tell you."

The doctor frowned.

"Ned, speak the truth."

"I always do."

"Is this a genuine invitation?"

"Upon the word of honor of a junior—yes."

"And Miss Templeton has sent for me?"

"No wonder you emphasize the last word. Yes, she is willing to forget the past and be friends, all of which is due to the junior. I mean to convince her you lack the length of ears you assumed to have the night of the ball."

Doctor Rube disregarded this roundabout insinuation, and relapsed into thought. Why had he been invited to call on the counterfeit Miss Templeton? Did she intend to defy him or ask for mercy? Certainly some new phase in the case was at hand.

He could not avoid a start as a new idea occurred to him. The plotters had sent an assassin to end his earthly career, and they wished to blind Boxfield to the fact that they had been concerned in the affair. The invitation was but a sham, but he intended to make it a means of confusing them.

"When do we go?" he asked, suddenly.

"Any time when the senior don't need me."

"How about this evening?"

"For a man who was so lately on the war-path 'gainst the lady you are impatient, but I will humor you. This evening it is."

And so it was settled, and Doctor Rube devoted the remainder of the day to thinking how he would confound the usurper when he appeared like a wraith from the sea. He also hoped "St. Jerome" would be there to share her baffled anger and annoyance.

They went as planned and were soon in Miss Templeton's presence. No other guest was in the field.

Doctor Rube was momentarily bewildered by the picture of loveliness presented to his view, but he winked twice in an energetic way and became the keen-eyed professional man. He looked for the expected consternation, but he looked in vain. Upon the lady's face there was not the slightest trace of the expected emotion.

She came forward gracefully, as a lady of refinement only can, and Doctor Rube was a little staggered as she frankly gave her hand. As it rested within his own he felt the same thrill he had experienced under slightly similar circumstances at the City of the Desert. Her beauty was almost intoxicating, and he looked into her eyes hoping to see a sign that she had some explanation to make.

No such explanation was vouchsafed; she remained the kind, smiling hostess, but nothing more.

Doctor Rube was annoyed, and wondered if the situation would be changed if Boxfield was not there. There was no sign that it would, and the doctor wavered between politeness and moroseness.

"I believe you resided for a time in Arizona," Miss Templeton observed, at one point in the interview.

"Yes, I did," he replied, brightening.

"In the mining region?"

"Yes; at Snicker's Gulch. That was about two days' journey from the secret city."

"The secret city? What is that?"

"Another name for the City of the Desert. They are one."

He looked at her significantly, but she did not show any signs of comprehension.

"I have heard Arizona spoken of as the strangest of our United States divisions, but I was never there," she serenely observed.

Doctor Rube felt like groaning.

"I was once a prisoner there," he said, desperately, "but I managed to escape. When I went I was accompanied by a young lady, but my efforts, coupled with the more powerful ones of a strange man called Iron-Armed Abe, were enough to baffle her enemies for a time."

"Indeed that was quite a romance," she said, with a calm smile which enraged him.

"It began as one, but it may end in a tragedy," Doctor Rube harshly declared, while Boxfield lifted his eyes in speechless horror.

"He's got 'em again, and they're crawling," he inwardly groaned. "What shall I do?"

"Wasn't the escape a success?" the girl continued.

"I really don't know, but I don't think I should play my part over again. I did it with a good will then, but I am now inclined to think the young woman was an adventuress."

At this point Boxfield, who had gained a position where Miss Templeton could not observe him, put his hands to his head and flapped them like wings, while his lips framed a word twice repeated.

"Ears, ears!"

At any other time this serio-comic appeal would have amused Doctor Rube, but in this case it had no such effect.

"You must tell me this story in full," said Leora, with a pretty assumption of interest.

"When?"

"Now, if Mr. Boxfield will be equally interested."

"He won't," that gentleman declared. "Sensational narratives have a tendency to produce sleeplessness with me, and, besides, I have just remembered a forgotten errand for my senior. Doctor, we must go."

"Excuse me; I will remain," was the firm reply.

Again Boxfield flapped his hands beside his head and his lips formed the magic word, "Ears!"

This time Miss Templeton caught a glimpse of this system of telegraphy and she looked closely at both men.

"Do you mean that you wish to tell me privately, Doctor Leyden?" she asked.

He replied affirmatively, though he did not clearly see how she had gained the idea.

"Then I am sure Mr. Boxfield will excuse us for a while," she said, smilingly.

Mr. Beesinger's junior wished he had strangled his friend before taking him there, but he allowed himself to be banished to another room for the ostensible purpose of examining a picture said to be from Raphael's hand.

"Now, doctor, I am ready to listen," said Miss Templeton, still smiling.

"What am I to say? It pleases you to act in a manner I cannot understand. I fail to see what your object is, madam."

Something like a look of pain crossed her face.

"Pardon me, doctor, but I don't understand myself. In what way have I failed to do my duty as a lady and as a hostess? I have endeavored to do both, trying the harder because you are Mr. Boxfield's friend."

"I will speak plainly, Miss Templeton. Do you deny that you were at the City of the Desert a year ago, that I saved you from a great peril, aided by Iron-Armed Abe, and that Captain Diamond was then your bitter foe?"

"You grow more incomprehensible," she said, with an air of bewilderment. "I know nothing of what you say. This City of the Desert and Captain Diamond are alike myths to me, though I now remember you mentioned them when we first met. I think, sir, you have confused my identity with that of some other person."

It trembled on Doctor Rube's lips to say that probably both she and Mr. St. Jerome had counterparts lying around at every turn in life's path, but he checked the retort and remained silent.

"Will you be so kind as to tell me all about this strange affair?" the young lady continued.

He had no objection, and he told the story of his experience at the City of the Desert in a dramatic fashion.

She listened with considerable interest and a good deal of surprise.

"Naturally, my resemblance to this girl surprised you," she then said, "but I am not she. I was living in California at that time, as companion to an old lady. If need be, I can prove an *alibi*."

The last words were gayly added, but he did not smile.

"And Mr. St. Jerome. Was he also in California?"

She laughed lightly.

"He was in Italy, in Rome, at that time. I received a letter from him every month."

These sweeping statements dumfounded Doctor Rube. He had expected to meet with denials, but it seemed as though Miss Templeton would have sworn that she was in the moon, if need be, and have told it without a change of features.

Plainly enough, he had met foemen worthy of his efforts when he undertook to solve the mystery.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE NEXT OF KIN.

WHEN Doctor Rube saw that it would be a waste of words to talk further with Miss Templeton, he abruptly resorted to the old expedient of looking at his watch and declaring he must go; and as the young lady could not very well say she would be very glad to have him stay longer, Boxfield was called in from a devout inspection of Raphael's work and the gentlemen left.

Once outside the lawyer waited in vain for his friend to speak; he had to open the ball himself.

"If you can throw off the sable ring of mystery enough to enlighten me, you will confer a favor on the court and merit some clemency," he observed.

Yielding to the impulse Rube declared he should know all, and in the solitude of his office he once more told the story of the strange scenes in which he mingled at the hidden city.

He did not make a convert. Boxfield scoffed at the doctor's theories from the first, and while he frankly admitted he would be glad to see St. Jerome proved guilty of some crime or other, which would take him away from Miss Templeton's side, the idea of the latter being concerned in anything dishonorable was absurd and outrageous.

The junior was still prancing about in high indignation when a small boy entered the office to call Doctor Leyden to a patient—an event so strange and unexpected that Boxfield forgot his wrath and shook him cordially by the hand.

The doctor went and found his patient in one of the humble streets commonly called "poor but respectable." The door was opened promptly, and he was directed to an attic room. There he found two women alone; one, his patient, old and bed-ridden; the other, her daughter, young and handsome.

The room was miserably furnished, and Rube read the old story of extreme poverty very clearly. The sick woman said she was glad to see him, and from that time she poured a catalogue of ills into his ears, which would have amazed any doctor if he had believed in them.

But Rube read the old lady well. Ill and peevish, she imagined scores of complaints, and made the task of caring for her doubly difficult; but her daughter bore her impatient words with commendable kindness, and always answered gently.

The doctor soon decided that his call had resulted from the old lady's nervous whim, but he made no haste to go. The daughter was so anxious to do all that their means would allow, that she had many questions to ask, and he was not reluctant to answer.

Esther Alton was decidedly a pretty girl.

Slightly above the medium height, she had a full, graceful figure, which even her coarse garments could not hide, and the thick masses of ebony hair framed in a most attractive face. It was a strong, earnest face, indicative of a positive nature, but the touch of her hand when she ministered to her mother was light, tender and admirable.

"Why do you talk about wines and fruit?" Mrs. Alton fretfully asked, anon. "We cannot afford such luxuries. We are beggars, beggars!"

"Mother!" said Esther, quickly.

"Don't deny it, child. You know it is true. There's only one life between us and a million dollars, but that is enough to beggar us."

"But, mother, the doctor will not care to hear this," protested Esther, in evident pain.

"I'm not so sure of that, for it is no common case. Doctor, you are a reading man, and must have seen advertisements for next of kin of Jacob Templeton."

"Of whom, madam?" questioned Doctor Rube, starting.

"Jacob Templeton, sometimes called the miser."

"I have heard of the case," said the doctor, with fresh interest.

"Well, we expected to get all this property once, for Leora Templeton had been reported dead, and we were the next heirs. The hope buoyed me up a good bit, for I thought it would rescue Esther from drudgery. Ah! doctor, such plans as I laid! Not for myself, for I am old and feeble, but for the daughter who is wasting her life for me. I did hope this era of beggary was past."

"But Miss Templeton was found?"

"Yes, doctor, and that was the death-knell of all our hopes; and since then my health has been a good deal poorer."

"Did she refuse to aid you financially, madam?"

"We did not ask, for we knew her reputation. 'Tis said her heart is of stone."

"Mother!" interrupted Esther.

"Let me talk, child; let me talk. I'm an old woman, and it's to be expected. Perhaps I am unjust, doctor, but I feel for my poor Esther."

"And very properly, too."

Doctor Rube looked at the young lady, who was busy over her work and evidently missed the last words, and then glanced about the room.

What a contrast there was in the lives of Leora Templeton and Esther Alton. One was living in a splendidly-furnished mansion, surrounded by servants and all that money could obtain, while the other lived in an attic, miserably-furnished and destitute of the necessities of life.

Yet, lacking the existence of the first, the second would be the possessor of Jacob Templeton's money. After Leora, Esther was the next of kin.

All Doctor Rube's indignation arose. It had been bad enough to see the self-styled Miss Templeton enjoying a false position, but when he knew what her fraud put upon others it was ten-fold worse.

While the impostor rolled in wealth, the real heiress was in utter poverty, perhaps lacking for bread.

He said little then, and did not hint that he knew Miss Templeton, but he vowed to go the next day and consult some respectable lawyer who might take up the Templeton case afresh.

"I'll devote a year to the affair, if necessary, but the wronged shall be righted," thought the doctor, as he strode homeward after leaving the Altons.

The hour was late, midnight having passed before he left his patient, and few people were on the street, except those who were supposed to protect the city and those who were staggering home after an evening of revelry.

Doctor Rube had made half the distance when he perceived two men standing by a street-lamp. There was nothing surprising in this, but, actuated by that impulse which often causes us to notice small things, he looked at them with mild curiosity.

Instantly, however, his mood changed. Both men were known to him; one was St. Jerome, the other, Ben Bolter. If he had wanted additional proof that the former had been at the bottom of Bolter's attack on him, it was now furnished. The two were not called together at that hour for any ordinary purpose.

Resolved to have Bolter arrested, the doctor dashed into the street so abruptly and blindly that he almost collided with a rapidly-driven carriage and, as it was, slipped and fell.

He was quickly up again, but when he looked again toward the corner, St. Jerome and Bolter were gone.

He dashed to the spot only to find they had completely disappeared, and as there seemed but one way for them to go so speedily, he rushed to the nearest house and began a vicious, but vain, pulling of the door-bell.

He was engaged in this work when a police officer appeared, and to him Rube told his story. The guardian of the night looked very doubtful and seemed to weigh his companion's breath in the balance, but as it lacked the scent

of liquor, finally deigned to add his own efforts to the bell.

A little investigation convinced him that the house was unoccupied, while meditation caused him to decide that he had no right to break in, but that it was his duty to take the doctor to the station-house for an explanation.

The latter did not object in the least. He had already made charges against Bolter, so he merely repeated them and stated that he had seen the man. He did not see fit to mention St. Jerome's name.

Alone in his room once more, he went over the whole case from the time he was kidnapped at Snicker's Gulch to the present time, and in accordance with the resolution formed he waited, the following day, upon J. Q. A. Smith, attorney-at-law, to inquire what the case looked like to a legal mind.

Mr. Smith was an able lawyer, a man who rarely lost a case and one who stood high among his fellow-craftsmen, but from his sanguine manner and sledge-hammer style he had gained the sobriquet of "Blacksmith."

To him Doctor Rube told the whole story, and without comment left it open to his opinion.

J. Q. A. Smith was delighted. He saw a chance to make a sensation and an increased reputation for himself if Leyden's charges could be proved, and he at once grasped at the chance.

"Bring this Miss Alton here to-morrow," he said, "and we will see if she is to be my client. If she is poor I'll make no charges until the case is won."

Satisfied that he had secured an honorable man, Doctor Rube went at once to the humble quarters of the Altons, and as the elder lady chanced to be asleep he bluntly stated his errand to Esther.

She listened with close attention, but frankly said she had no hope in the case. She had never seen Leora Templeton, but she had never suspected the present user of the name to be an impostor, while if she was it was probable her position was fortified, as it were.

"I will acknowledge that for my mother's sake I would like enough money to make us comfortable," Esther added, "but even if this fortune is rightfully ours, we shall enter upon a long and bitter lawsuit to obtain it."

"Still, I do not think Mrs. Alton would decline it."

"Nor shall I. If this lawyer is willing to conduct the suit on the terms he has mentioned, I, for one, am willing. Doubtless my mother will say the same. I will now awake her."

This was done and the case explained to the old lady. Doctor Rube had expected to see her grasp unreservedly at the chance, but she hesitated even longer than Esther.

At first she could not credit that an impostor held possession of the property, and when Doctor Rube had assured her that only justice could triumph, she wavered for awhile at the publicity and then gave her consent.

So, on the whole, his good opinion of both increased. They evidently had an honor which would not allow them to take any advantage, and they were certainly poor enough to deserve their full rights.

Leaving them, he went again to the office of J. Q. A. Smith and placed the case unreservedly in his hands.

"I'll go for it at once," the lawyer said, rubbing his hands, "and it'll be all the more interesting because I shall look horns with old Bee-singer. That man, sir, is an unscrupulous wine-bibber, and I shall be pleased to tear the mask from the face of his pet client. Justice, sir, will clap her hands with joy and the orphan shall have his rights—her rights, I mean."

Doctor Rube left Mr. Smith indulging in these rose-colored pictures and went to his own office.

A letter lay upon his table, addressed to himself in a bold hand, and tearing it open he read as follows.

"A friend who wishes him well would say to Doctor Leyden that if he wishes to live his three-score-and-ten years, he had better devote his attention to the practice of medicine and let other people's affairs alone. In San Francisco it is not always safe to meddle. Bear this in mind and let common-sense direct and save you."

To this note there was no signature, but Doctor Rube felt that none was needed. Once more he recognized the hand of Captain Diamond, and he saw that the affair was assuming more pronounced form.

The conspirators were thoroughly alarmed and resolved to put him out of the way by some means.

He sat beside the table staring at the warning for several minutes. Did the end in view justify him for risking his own life? Diamond, as he had seen, was very powerful. All that power would be turned against Rube now, and the fight would be an unequal one.

Yet, the doctor, remembering Esther Alton, resolved to press on and do his best. He felt able to care for himself under ordinary circumstances, and if Ben Bolter was arrested a confession might follow which would place Diamond behind the bars.

Rube walked over to the police station to in-

quire if Ben had been seen, but there was nothing new and it was clear the authorities did not yet know where to look for him.

Returning, the doctor suddenly met Diamond face to face on the street. He instinctively paused, and then the other man advanced with a pleasant smile.

"Glad to see you, Doctor Leyden," he said, extending his hand. "I was just thinking of you, among others whom I met at the ball."

His coolness surprised Rube, but, resolved not to be outdone, he met the advance in kind. The time had not yet arrived for unmasking his batteries fully, and they stood together for several minutes and chatted with a lightness not to be expected from enemies.

Meditation convinced Doctor Rube that this encounter had been premeditated on St. Jerome's part and had been for the purpose of learning if he was suspected in connection with Ben Bolter's attack; but if he had expected a specific charge he was disappointed.

Doctor Rube kept his own counsel and met artifice with its own kind.

"He is a sharp and unscrupulous villain, but he may yet find himself in the web," thought the doctor, when once more in his room. "He shall go to destruction—he and Leora Templeton. Strange that I feel pity for her, even now. But, bah! she is a mere adventuress and I must shake off the spell!"

CHAPTER XV.

NOROLA MAKES NEW ACQUAINTANCES.

NED BOXFIELD found himself placed in an uncomfortable position toward Mr. Jerome, simply because he could not clearly understand the latter's relations toward Miss Templeton. As her friend the pale gentleman was entitled to good usage, but Ned had such a strong suspicion that the man was also a suitor for her hand that he often felt like challenging him to a fight on the dueling field.

Nevertheless, they remained friends, and one day they might have been seen in a boat together and pursuing much the same course taken by Doctor Rube when he visited the Tuttle cabin.

They went at St. Jerome's suggestion, and it was he who used the oars.

There is something very fascinating about the water for those who like it and are dwellers on the land, and both men enjoyed the trip and acted like school-boys let loose.

Noon found them in camp on the western shore of the water-arm, eating a cold lunch and washing it down with water with as much relish as though they had been handling the choicest of food and drinks.

They were thus occupied when the sound of oars drew their attention, and looking through the bushes which fringed the shore, they saw a boat round the point of land.

In this there was nothing strange, yet both men suspended their eating and gazed steadfastly at the little craft and its occupant. The latter furnished a good subject for interest. No grizzled or bronzed old sea-dog did they see, but a young woman of superior beauty.

"A mermaid!" said St. Jerome, lightly.

But Boxfield did not answer. He had an eye which was both artistic and human, and the grace and beauty of the girl touched him and stilled his inclination to jest. No clownish woman was she, but one who seemed capable of doing herself honor in the highest places in San Francisco.

Suddenly, however, affairs assumed a new aspect. She was looking to the rear, and forgetful of the fact that the water was very low, found herself planted on a muddy bar before she suspected its proximity.

She used her oars but the craft hung tightly, and she was looking at the mud in deep distress when there was another sound of oars, and Boxfield and St. Jerome came to her aid.

Their exertions rescued her from her unpleasant position, but she did not seem inclined to dally for further acquaintance. They looked at her in a way she considered too bold and free, and picking up her oars again she merely thanked them and rowed away.

"Let's follow her," said St. Jerome.

Boxfield hesitated for a moment. The temptation to learn where the water Hebe lived was strong, but he had a deep vein of honor under his volatile exterior and he resisted the temptation.

The girl receded from their view, they made their way back to San Francisco and she was mentioned no more. Yet, one, at least, of them did not forget her.

A few days after—it was the one following the events of our last chapter—St. Jerome was rowing over the same water. This time he did not seem so listless as before, for though his course was erratic he watched both land and water closely and paid particular attention to every passing boat.

"Hello!" he said at last, "here's another cabin looking like an egg-shell on the ocean, or something of that sort. I'll call, though I've no doubt it will be like my previous efforts."

Securing his boat to a bush near the water's edge he began the ascent of the rocky bill which

led to the cabin, but when half-way up he suddenly paused.

Before him, seated at the foot of a large tree, was the heroine of his water encounter; a girl we need scarcely say was Norola, the daughter of Griff.

St. Jerome removed his hat politely.

"Upon my word, this is a pleasant surprise," he said, trying to force an agreeable smile to his face. "I did not expect to see you here."

Norola gave no sign of being pleased in turn. "I expected you were in San Francisco," she replied.

"And why there? Do you know me?"

"No; but I would have wagered something you came from the city the other day."

"Judging by my appearance?" inquired St. Jerome with rising vanity.

"Judging by your boat," was the calm reply.

"I had seen it before that day."

"You are observing, I see."

"One needs to be in this life."

"And philosophical, too. By the way, you haven't asked me to sit down."

"Nor have I bade you stand. I don't claim the right to control your movements."

The rebuff was so pointed that he flushed a little in spite of that cold, white complexion which was so slow to show emotion. Perhaps Norola spoke more plainly than she intended, but she feared and disliked the man. The diamond which blazed at the front of his shirt seemed to her like the eye of a serpent, and despite her brave nature she felt like making a precipitate flight.

"It isn't to be expected you will control my movements," St. Jerome answered with a disagreeable smile. "I never saw the person that could do that, and you—" he added, pausing to shrug his shoulders; "well, you are neither a queen of fashion or wealth."

"Quite true, sir. I realize that I am not a proper associate for you."

Her calm indifference annoyed him, though he was one whom no man could stir from his icy serenity. He grasped her arm in no tender hold.

"Listen to me, girl, and don't fly so high. I came here to-day as your friend. I am not blind, and I can see that you are pretty and intelligent; in brief, that you're an angel. Come, my dear, let us be friends."

The serpent's eye blazed balefully, and the eyes of the man seemed to take the same pale, forbidding hue. Norola's color retreated from her cheeks and, thoroughly frightened, she would have fled, but his hold tightened on her arm.

"Not so fast, my lady. I want you to know no beggar can scorn me. I've bent many a proud head to my will, and you lack the prowess to mold me, potent though your hand may be. Come, my angel, let us be friends."

The cold calmness of the man seemed entirely gone. His whole manner was excited, brutal and insolent, and he threw his arm about her waist and drew her closer to him while the serpent's eye glittered and glared in the rays of the sun.

He bent his head toward her lips, but at that moment a sound like a chuckle stayed his movements. Norola, too, who had been speechless with alarm, looked beyond them. The bushes had been parted and a human face was framed in the opening—the wild, emaciated, unnatural face of the deranged woman, The Wild.

To Norola it was a familiar sight, but to her surprise St. Jerome's hands dropped to his side and he remained staring with affrighted eyes and a face even paler than usual. No wretch cowering at the gallows ever betrayed a more complete overthrow of firmness.

A brief, painful pause followed and then the expression of The Wild changed. One arm was stretched forward with the finger pointing at St. Jerome, and in a voice which was almost a shriek, she cried:

"Look! look! it is he!"

And then she sprang through the bushes like a tigress, only to fall prostrate on the ground before reaching him, tearing at her gray hair and frothing at the mouth.

Her fall seemed to arouse St. Jerome, and with a cry almost as startling as hers he bounded away. There was a crash as the bushes opened and closed before his rush and then he was gone.

Norola heard his footsteps in rapid retreat for a moment and then all was still. The Wild had ceased to exclaim, almost to move. She lay flat on her face, her whole body quivering, and was the strangest part of the strange scene Norola had witnessed.

The girl speedily recovered her composure and bent over the deranged woman, but even when she raised her head she lay still and shivered as before.

Norola was about to go for Griff, but thinking of a simpler way brought water and bathed her face and hands. The remedy was effectual; The Wild soon opened her eyes and looked around with momentary calmness.

Then the old look entered her eyes.

"Where's he—where has he gone?" she demanded.

"He has run away," Norola gently answered.

"Let me follow him; I will go and avenge my wrongs; I will tear his throat as a panther tears his prey. I'll kill him; ki i-ill him!"

She was in a furious mood, but Norola had always been able to control her and the present case was no exception.

"You do not know him, Miss Wild," she soothingly said.

"Don't know him? When the tigress forgets her young, I'll forget him! Don't know him? Ha, ha! How can I forget, when the big diamond blazes at his breast? Ah! he may hide in earth or sea, but while he wears that jewel, all will know him. And he will wear it forever."

"What is his name?"

"Name?"

"Yes."

"I don't know. And yet, I ought to. Strange that I should forget when I have such cause to remember."

"You knew him once, then?"

The Wild laughed shortly.

"Didn't I? I knew him well. What did I say was his name? Well, never mind; let us call him Lucifer."

"When and where did you know him?"

"I don't know. How should I, when I don't even know my own name? I'm all at sea; but I know he once did me a wrong. I can never forget that face—I can never forget that diamond. When I look at it I feel like one receiving an electric shock. But come with me and we'll find him again. Come!"

The Wild was in earnest, and it was only by the use of gentle persuasion and a promise that Griff should look into the matter, that Norola coaxed her away to the cabin.

And this promise she meant to keep. If The Wild had found a leaf in her old life, it must be recovered if her efforts, or those of her father, could avail anything.

That evening two men sat in an obscure room in San Francisco. One was Ben Bolter, who smoked and took his ease in a big but dilapidated arm-chair with the air of a prince at home.

The second was Mr. St. Jerome; but one glance showed him in a mood far from happy or contented.

Sitting at a table, he leaned his elbows on the board and pillowed his head on his hands, while the serpent's eye glittered fantastically in the light.

Bolter had glanced at him curiously several times in half an hour, and he finally spoke:

"Ef this ain't a Quaker set-up, I'd suggest as how we sling ther picture-pack a bit. I ain't no great gamboller, but 'most any one kin fall inter line on poker or—"

"Curse your cards!" growled St. Jerome. "I am in no mood for playing. Do you believe in ghosts?"

"Ghosts? No; can't say I do. Ef you'd said spearits, an' made 'em liquid, I'd b'en on ther home base."

"And you never saw a dead person after he, or she, was buried?"

Mr. Bolter shook his head as though the fact grieved him.

"Nary time."

"What would you do if an enemy was to come back?"

"Kill him over again," the ruffian coolly answered, as he cleared his pipe with a fragment from the broom.

St. Jerome lowered his hands and looked squarely at his ally, while the serpent's eye, set in motion, danced and glittered afresh.

"I have such an enemy," he slowly said.

"Show him ter me, an' his candle will go out in ther bloom of youth, and all sech trash. I'm ther boy to exsassinat him."

CHAPTER XVI.

AN OLD ENEMY REAPPEARS.

ST. JEROME smiled slightly, but it was not a mischievous or hopeful expression.

"What are your terms?" he asked.

"I'll kill any man, woman or child in California fur ther sparkier you wear on your shirt-bosom. That air jewel is a daisy. Ef I had it I'd put on swell clothes and appear in Washington among ther scribes an' Pharisees."

"You like it, eh?"

"Didn't I say so?"

"You did, but we can't trade. I wouldn't give that diamond for the whole wealth of California. Money could not buy it."

"Why not?"

"It's a talisman; a safeguard against death and peril of all sorts."

"How's that?"

"Years ago it was foretold that no harm should come to me as long as I wore it—and obeyed one or two other orders. I've done it right along and all has gone well. I wouldn't give the talisman away, anyhow."

Bolter looked at the diamond greedily, and it was well for St. Jerome that his tool expected to make an equal sum out of him by more secret work. Still, it occurred to him that if matters ever assumed the proper shape, the diamond might change hands. Its glitter had a strange

fascination for him, as it did for every one else, but Ben looked the serpent squarely in the eyes.

"Every man knows his own affairs best," he finally added, cheerfully, "an' ef you see fit to hang to it that's no reason why I should not kill your enemy. What's his handle?"

"My enemy is a woman," said St. Jerome, gnawing his mustache viciously.

"All samee. Who is she? Is it knife or revolver?"

"Neither," was the moody reply. "She mustn't be killed; I wouldn't have her killed for a fortune."

Mr. Bolter stared stupidly.

"Which?"

"I hate this woman and there is danger for me while she lives, but I dare not kill her or order her killed. In fact, I won't have it so."

"Why not?"

St. Jerome hesitated and seemed on the point of confession, but he evidently changed his mind. Arising abruptly, he paced the room several times across with lowered head and a gloomy face.

Bolter eyed him constantly, but his gaze was oftener on the diamond than on the face. The serpent's eye had a way of flashing in the light which was charming to the gentleman surnamed Bolter.

Finally, the other man returned to his seat.

"I won't try to explain all this to you, for it would be a waste of breath. Let me, however, put a question before you. Can you tell me how to effectually dispose of this woman without doing her bodily injury?"

"Shut her up som'ers."

"These imprisoned people always escape."

"Not when I take charge on 'em. Let me turn the key on her one't an' she'll never peep again in public till you say so."

"Have you a prison in mind?"

"Ther coziest ye ever see'd."

St. Jerome thought of a certain place far away in the wilds of Arizona which might well be termed "cozy," but he made no comment. In coming to San Francisco he left all his City of the Desert men behind, and he did not intend to tell Ben Bolter of his kingdom.

With the ice fairly broken, however, he was not long in coming to terms with the fellow. He had been a San Francisco rascal for years and knew its ins and outs, and he declared at the wave of his wand a man or woman would disappear as completely as though literally buried.

When the leading villain left full arrangements had been made for the abduction of the mad woman who had given him such a fright. He would not be safe while she was at liberty, and he was not one to delay about a settled purpose.

Leaving the house at last, St. Jerome paused at the door to light a cigar and then started down the street. The hour was that when nearly all working-people had taken to their homes, and yet not late enough to present deserted streets.

He was strolling along when some one touched his arm and a voice sounded in his ear:

"May I trouble you for a light?"

It was a polite call, and one men seldom hear without sympathy as man to man, but something in the voice made St. Jerome wheel with suspicious abruptness.

Then from his lips fell an exclamation too emphatic for even casual repetition.

Before him stood a powerfully built man, and yet one who was more than a head and neck shorter than he. A huge hump was between his shoulders, and as he stood his unnaturally long arms dangled below his knees.

This man smiled sarcastically.

"You don't seem pleased to see me," he observed.

"Pleased? I wish the devil would fly away with you," was the earnest answer.

"Don't get in a passion, King Diamond. Between old friends there should be no show of mere ceremony. Exult, and be glad, King Diamond!"

St. Jerome bit at his cigar until it fell in pieces at his feet, but the hunchback met his ferocious glare with a calm smile.

"Why have you followed me here?"

"To see you in your new role, and to know what that role is. Naturally, I feel an interest in you, for you are a remarkable man. At the City of the Desert you are a king; here you are a gentleman of the first water. Great is King Diamond!"

"What do you want?"

"Have I said that I want anything?"

"No."

"Then give yourself no concern about me. Better look to yourself. Leaving jesting alone, you know I am no friend of yours. The bleaching bones of some dozens, more or less, of your sensational Black Riders bear witness to the prowess of Iron-Armed Abe; and were it not that your race is not so far run as pleases me, I would wrap my fingers about your neck and strangle you like a sick cat!"

The hunchback smiled horribly, and held up his long, muscular fingers. They looked capable of crushing wood and steel. St. Jerome leaned

against the nearest building, and his white face twitched nervously.

Given a sword, or a revolver, he would have met five ordinary men at that moment without a waver; but in the hands of Iron-Armed Abe he was almost like clay. Had a score of his men been there he would have ordered them to kill him; but for his own part he could not strike a blow.

"I've come here to find out what game you're playing," the hunchback continued, "and I am going to know. You slipped away from the City of the Desert silently and secretly; but it's a blind trail I can't follow. I've been your shadow, King Diamond, ever since you drove her to her death."

St. Jerome started. Many times before, in the last five years, he had heard this same taunt from his enemy's lips, but it had never fallen so heavily before. The trembling about his mouth was not like him, but there was a method in all his freaks.

At this moment a police officer directed them to move on, and Iron-Armed Abe suggested that they go into a saloon. St. Jerome spoke of going to his room, but his companion merely laughed, and holding his arm, led him to the place unresistingly.

They sat down, called for drinks, and then sat looking silently at each other. Gradually, however, a smile crossed the hunchback's face.

"You're meditating mischief, King Diamond," he said. "You own a tolerably stoical face, but I can read you well. Still, I don't blame you; I'm your enemy, and it is natural you should wish me out of the way."

"You know I dare not kill you."

"Nonsense! You're foolish to let such scruples stand in your way. If I was you, I wouldn't do it. You are a strange compound of strength and weakness, King Diamond, with the flavor of unsurpassable villainy over all."

St. Jerome did not answer, but sat scowling at the light as though it had some share in his discomfiture. The serpent's eye, too, seemed to gleam more vividly than usual, as though aware that its owner was under a cloud.

"Sometimes," continued Iron-Armed Abe, "I wish I had strangled you years ago—"

"I wish you had!" the younger man feverishly cried.

"You wish nothing of the kind, King Diamond. All you wish is that I was less alert, so that your tools might put me out of the way. You hate and fear me, and you would almost surrender your power at the City of the Desert to see me dead. Yet, if I was to turn my own revolver upon my breast, and bid you fire at this moment, you would not pull the trigger."

Captain Diamond did not answer, and yet the statement was true. It was one of the peculiarities of his nature, which, as the hunchback had said, was a strange mixture of strength and weakness. He dared not touch the man he hated, yet at that moment he was planning his death. Never before had he realized how dangerous to him was Iron-Armed Abe.

"Do you ever dream of her?" the hunchback suddenly asked.

"No," was the only reply.

"I believe you speak falsely. Even you, King Diamond, can not grind out human hearts and brains and leave no record. It is my intention, when I kill you, to give you a nameless grave, the same as she had. Well, perhaps it was just the same; marble slabs and shafts can't bring peaceful sleep. It is well she died, King Diamond, for if she had lived to suffer, I would have tortured you as an Indian never tortured his prey."

St. Jerome did not answer. He was looking moodily away, and the hunchback reached out one long arm and touched him on the shoulder. Instantly the man started to his feet, overturning his chair, and a look of terror was depicted on his face.

The emotion passed as quickly as it had come, and he resumed his seat with a short, unmusical laugh, while Abe wondered at his unusual nervousness.

He did not know that a guilty mind had made his companion foolishly imagine that the touch was that of another hand than Abe's; he had not known that the guilty man, in turning, had momentarily expected to see the face of The Wild.

"What game has brought you to San Francisco?" continued the hunchback.

"None."

"False, King Diamond, false. You have some plot in your prolific brain and I am going to learn what it is and thwart you."

"Don't meddle!" warned St. Jerome, a trace of his old fire flashing in his eyes.

"Bah! you know how I regard your wrath, and you can't bate me more than you do now. I tell you I am going to baffle you. Meet me as you will."

Before St. Jerome could answer, the keeper of the saloon began making preparations for closing for the night and the two enemies went out together. At the door Abe plucked his companion by the sleeve.

"Good-day, for now," he said, "but remember I am on your track. I shall baffle your dearest plots!"

With this warning the hunchback turned and glided away in the darkness. St. Jerome made no effort to delay him, but, hastening in the opposite direction, was soon in his own room.

Once there he behaved like anybody except cool Captain Diamond. Commencing with a generous drink of brandy, he then lit a cigar and then strode the room like a pirate on the quarter-deck. He was terribly upset, and the nature of the case placed him at fault. He was scheming for a million dollars, but Iron-Armed Abe had sworn to thwart him and he was afraid he would do it.

Far into the night that steady tramp was to be heard as he revolved plan after plan in his mind to save himself from ruin.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE NIGHT MARAUDERS.

"Give way, men!"

It was the night following the events last related and a boat was crossing the sheet of water we have before noticed. It contained five men, four of whom were at the oars.

The fifth sat in the stern of the craft with almost statue like stillness. He was wrapped in a cloak, which was nearly met by a broad-brimmed hat, so that even an acquaintance might have failed to recognize him, but was, in brief, Captain Diamond.

One of the oarsmen was Ben Bolter; the others were friends whom he had enlisted for the enterprise then in hand.

Diamond would have given a good deal for Redspur and a few more of the Black Riders, but they were miles away and he did not expect to see them for some time. Having work to do he must rely on Bolter and the rascals of San Francisco.

The boat proceeded up the sheet of water until the leader recognized certain prominent points of the bold east coast. Directing their course more carefully, they finally made a landing and the boat was driven well up on the land.

Leaving it alone they ascended the bank with St. Jerome at their head. He still retained his cloak and hat, but his eyes were busy and he easily recognized the spot where he had last seen Norola and had been frightened away by the appearance of The Wild.

Somewhere beyond was a cabin, and it was this they wished to find—an undertaking which gave them no trouble. Under the shelter of a cliff as rugged as himself, Griff had his home.

It was surveyed and plans laid for their work, and then St. Jerome took Bolter aside.

"Remember," he said, "there must be no bloodshed."

"Nary drop, cap'n."

"Be as gentle as possible, and yet be sure."

"You kin rely on me."

And then Bolter took his men and proceeded nearer to the cabin and its sleeping inmates.

"I would give five thousand dollars if they would kill her," muttered St. Jerome.

Strange inconsistency! for he had just given wholly different orders to Bolter; but, with all his coldness and sagacity, St. Jerome was a strange man.

He waited and listened for some sound from the house, scarcely stirring a finger. He was in that state of nervous expectation so hard to bear philosophically, for he knew something important was about to occur.

And so there did. Suddenly, a series of shrill screams burst on the air and the watcher ground out a fierce exclamation between his set teeth. He believed his men had failed and he was tempted to flee. The cries, too, had a deep significance for him.

Suddenly they ceased, but other sounds came from the cabin and showed the family astir. Griff was aroused, and from what St. Jerome had that day learned of his mettle he believed it to the advantage of his tools to get away before the sturdy fisherman saw them.

Evidently they thought so also, for he saw them running toward him in a body. Nor was this all. They bore a burden with them, the nature of which he was not slow to understand.

Victory seemed to be theirs.

"Hop an' jump, cap'n!" ordered Bolter, breathlessly. "We've got ther female, but ther hull durned caboodle is waked up an' things is dang'rous. Skip!"

St. Jerome needed no urging and they ran to the water together. The boat was pushed off, the men entered, dropped their burden inside, oars were dipped and the craft receded from the shore.

At that moment there was a shout from above them, and looking up, they saw Griff outlined against the dim sky, together with the rifle he held in his hand.

"Halt, thar!" he shouted, in a ringing voice. "Turn fur ther shore or I shoot!"

"Blaze away, Old Hundred!" cried Bolter, airily.

The command was literally obeyed; there was a flash and report, and a bullet whistled into the midst of the kidnappers, one of whom dropped his oar and the boat swung inshore in great confusion.

"Malediction! are you hit?" St. Jerome cried.

The man resumed his oar.

"I'm worth a dozen dead men. Pull away!"

Again they caught the water and the boat resumed her course. One oarsman was bleeding from a slight wound in the forearm—a proof of Griff's skill—but though it had caused temporary confusion, he settled down to work with the grim resolution of his class.

St. Jerome touched Bolter on the arm and pointed to the motionless heap at their feet.

"She is very still. Have you dared injure her?"

"No; it's only a woman's swoon, an' them's a kind that'll get flabby ef a mouse squeaks. No, I ain't did her hurt."

The leader scowled at the captive in the darkness and devoutly wished Bolter had killed her. He wished, too, that their craft would unset and drown her.

"Hyar comes ther pursuit," said Bolter, suddenly. "Reckon that ole chap thinks he kin out-row this crew."

"Let him come and I'll put a bullet through his head," St. Jerome said, and there was no longer weakness in his voice.

If a dozen Griffs had stood before him he had the courage to fight all, and his conscience would never have troubled him if his hand had sent them to the grave.

Evidently, however, Griff was not a man to be afraid of flying lead. He had launched his own boat and got under way, and it was the momentary rattle of his oars that had arrested Bolter's attention. This sound soon ceased, however, for Griff was a thorough waterman, and he came flying down the lake at a pace which made St. Jerome loosen his revolver.

He meant to keep his threat if the pursuer made himself obnoxious.

"I say, thare, hallo!" Griff called as he overhauled them in a way which made Ben Bolter feel amazed.

"Hallo yourself!" St. Jerome answered.

"Hold on a bit; you've got something that don't belong to you. There's nothin' on ther way-bills that includes The Wild on your cargo. Ef you hold on, it will save expense."

"Keep back!" ordered St. Jerome sharply. "I know what I'm about, and I won't bear interference. Keep off, or I'll put a bullet through you!"

"Blaze away!" cheerfully answered Griff, and his boat cut the water like a fish's fin.

The stout fisherman, though he had just made a good shot, had little faith in revolver-shooting in the dark, and he was a good deal surprised when three quick flashes from the leading villain's position was followed by a leaden hail, which made matters warm around in his section. One shot cut away a portion of his beard, as he looked over his shoulder, a second ventilated his hat, and the third struck his right oar close to his hand.

It was a close call, but Griff was no child. He kept on bravely, and St. Jerome, who did not like the idea of so much firing, suddenly changed his tactics. At his command his boatmen changed their course, swung around and shot down to meet their pursuer.

Their stratagem was so neatly executed that Griff plainly saw he lacked the time necessary to save himself from being run down, so he made no attempt to avoid them. Instead, he loosened his knife and revolver, and planned to go into their midst to win or lose all when the shock came.

It was a great risk to run—great odds to dare—but Griff was not the man to stop for such trifles. His life had been the stake in many an affray before then.

St. Jerome felt a sincere admiration for such dauntless bravery, and under the impulse of the moment resolved to save him. An extra oar lay in the bottom of the larger boat, and he lifted it and prepared for work.

There was a brief interval of time, and then the two boats met; but just as Griff would have made his leap, St. Jerome struck out with the oar as though it had been a spear, and the fisherman, struck squarely in the stomach, reeled back and fell into the water with a splash.

Another instant and the boats collided, the smaller one was overturned and the larger rode triumphantly over the wreck.

"Home!" commanded St. Jerome tersely, and the men bent over their oars and resumed their old course.

But the times seemed wholly out of joint, and another hail arose from the rear—this time a double one, as though two voices were blended.

"Another boat!" said Ben Bolter, with a profane addition.

"Pull on!" hissed St. Jerome. "Malediction! are we to have the whole county at our heels? Look ye, men, what one among you has scruples?"

The crew scoffed in concert; conscience and they were not on speaking terms.

"Then, by my life, we'll make it hot for those fools if they follow. I'm not going to be chased back to Frisco, and all our plans found out and identities laid bare. Not I! If they close in, messmates, let's give 'em lead and steel."

The rough fellows echoed his sentiments, and it became clear that if the new pursuers succeeded in closing in it would be to meet a warm

reception. St. Jerome looked back at them beligerently. Except that his power was less, he was the same cool, brave man known in the City of the Desert; his peculiarities, as seen in his intercourse with The Wild and Iron-Armed Abe, did not extend to those unknown enemies.

Let us see who they were.

They had been close at hand when Griff went over the gunwale, and they closed in with a rush, wholly ignorant as to the trouble, but resolved to strike for the right.

When they arrived the larger boat was receding, the smaller floated bottom upward and they were about to go on when a man arose beside their own craft and feebly caught at the gunwale.

It was Griff, who must have sunk but for this timely aid. Ordinarily he would have been as much at home as a fish, but a solid blow in the stomach is not calculated to make a man show at his best immediately after; and Griff had the narrowest escape of his life.

He was dragged into the boat, and then its two occupants looked about.

"Do you see any more, Ned?" one asked.

"There are no more," gasped Griff. "Pursue, pursue! The infernal villains has got The Wild."

The previous speaker started and bent over him quickly, evidently seeking to distinguish his face.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CHASE BY NIGHT.

"Griff!"

The rescued man looked up quickly on hearing his name pronounced.

"Hallo, is it you, Doctor Rube?" he exclaimed. "Wall, we're wail met, that's all. The Wild bez b'en stole; help me git her back an' I'm yours, truly."

"Pull, Ned!"

Doctor Rube spoke the words tersely, and then both oarsmen bent to their work and the boat went flying along in pursuit.

Griff found his strength returning more rapidly than could be expected, and he gained a sitting position and looked after the fugitives.

"Twixt you an' me, doctor, thar needn't be much said. They've got The Wild an' I want her back. I's in a fair way o' doin' it alone, but they poked me in the wind an' I'd b'en fish-bait ef you hadn't rowed down."

"Who are they?" Doctor Rube asked, between strokes.

"Don't know. They raided the house an' tuk her, an' that's all I do know."

"What can they want of her?" the doctor wonderingly continued.

"Now you hev me. Thar ain't many as would hanker arter The Wild. She ain't no-wise putty, nor she ain't brilliant. I've tuk car' o' her because she was unfortunate, but them galoots must hev another object fur ther stealing."

Ned Boxfield, who had managed to discover that Griff was the father of the beautiful girl he had seen when he and St. Jerome were up the water together, was about to introduce himself to the fisherman when something occurred to change his plans.

"I have an idee," resumed Griff, "which may er may not be handsome. Some leetle time ago two young Frisco bloods come up hyar on a t'ar, an' as my gal happened ter run on a mud-bar they did the putty an' helped her off; arter which they smirked an' grinned an' tried ter be 'greeable, but she see'd ther devil in their eyes an' shook 'em. That wa'n't the end on't, fur one day one on 'em showed up ag'in an' tried ter be fascinatin' ter Norola. Leetle good it did him, fur she wouldn't speak ter him per-lite, an' jest then The Wild happened ter stroll along. No sooner did ther blood see her than he give a squeak an' dusted like a lunatic, an' The Wild nigh had a fit an' swore'd she had see'd him afore. Norola 'lowed The Wild had stumbled on a page outer her past, an' though that thare man may be innocent, I has my doubts. I'll bet a collar he's in ther boat ahead on us."

This explanation had been made while Rube and Ned were using their oars lustily.

Ned no longer desired to introduce himself. He had been branded a rascal, and the deeper he sunk his identity the better. The explanation set him to thinking, however. Plainly the man who had made the second visit, as related, had been St. Jerome.

Could it be he was in the boat ahead?

Mr. Beesinger's junior had been the so-called friend of St. Jerome because he was Leora Templeton's friend, but we need scarcely say he would not have been sorry to see him proved a rascal. If he was one Ned was just enough to wish it known, and from his point of view it would remove a man who might one day be a rival.

Consequently, he bent to his oar and pulled lustily, wondering if Doctor Rube had believed his statement that the present expedition was merely one of pleasure.

At any rate, he was glad he had not told him about the Hebe or Rube might brand him a rascal also.

The two boats flew over the water in a way

worthy of professional skill. Pursued and pursuers were alike in earnest, though those in the rear boat little knew the importance of that race.

After five minutes Griff offered to relieve Doctor Rube, and the latter was not sorry. During the last four years he had seen little of aquatic work, and was no match for the fisherman, or even for Ned Boxfield, who had been a boat-puller all his life.

Crouching at the prow of the boat the doctor ultimately saw that they were gaining, despite the fact that the pursued were lashing the water to a white foam in their efforts to escape.

Some one else saw it, too, and St. Jerome ground his teeth with rage.

"Men," said he, "it's sink or swim with us."

"I'm fur swimmin'," volunteered Ben Bolter.

"Ther rest on you may do ez you please, but them varmints can't gobble me up. I carry a revolver an' know how ter use it."

"What say the rest of you?"

All expressed a preference for fighting rather than running.

"Then fight it is," declared St. Jerome. "A little further and we will turn at bay with weapons ready. Then it's each for himself and victory to the best man."

"Ef I was ter chirrup," said Ben Bolter, "I'd say this water won't be a healthy place much longer. Thar's a moanin' in ther air ther rest on you may not hev noticed, but I kin tell you thar's a bad one brewin' in the shape o' wind, an' we will soon get it hyar. Ef thar's a bad p'int anywhar, it's hyar. Ef ther breeze strikes us, out goes our candle!"

No one laughed at the warning; even St. Jerome, though he was no waterman, found something suspicious in the aspect of nature.

"We'll get in our stroke before she blows," he said, grimly. "When I give the word, swing her around and make for the other boat. Hit her in the side and try to stave her in, if possible. I'll have my revolvers ready and play the battery."

The men heard with admiration, for St. Jerome was one who could thrill less intelligent men in times of danger. They declared themselves ready to follow his orders through all.

The word came soon and the boat swung around. She bowed a little as the already choppy waves struck her side, but, putting her stern to the breeze, darted forward under the tremendous strokes of the oars like an animate thing.

The maneuver was all well enough, but it lacked one essential to success, the people in the other boat were not foolish enough to be hit as St. Jerome had planned.

Consequently, as the larger boat sped down, its crew saw the nose of the pursuer turned grimly toward them. The latter was willing to grapple, but they desired a whole craft under them.

St. Jerome had another scheme in his mind. He now saw that he must use his "batteries."

He opened the ball without delay, and with a six-shooter in each hand blazed away with machine-like regularity.

Thick and fast came the leaden hail, and as Doctor Rube had no taste for the role of martyr he resolved to play the same sort of card; so the rival crafts rushed for each other with a lively fusillade in progress.

"Down with ther tenderfuts!" shouted Ben Bolter, and the cry set the whole menagerie in motion.

Nearly every man seemed to think he had a call to shout, and he did it in a conscientious and distinct manner. The uproar drowned one other sound which they had better have heeded, and no one saw the squall which was rushing down upon them.

As the other boat came nearer Doctor Rube attempted to fire with some method, and he had the satisfaction of seeing one kidnapper pitch forward over his oar and disappear in the water.

Another moment and the boats touched.

Griff had been preparing for the crisis, and to those who knew his way this meant a good deal. As they touched he dropped his oars, caught the knife he had for several minutes held in his teeth and leaped like a cat into the larger boat.

What would have been the result no one might say except to prophesy a most sanguinary strife, for all at once the scene changed and man was made to see how powerless was his wrath before that of his Creator.

The gust of wind struck, with its white line of foam, and the boats were raised like eggshells. It passed, and the smaller craft was floating bottom upward, while the larger sped away on the surface of the water like a frightened deer.

When his craft went over Doctor Rube instinctively threw out his hand and grasped one of the seats. He held fast, though instantly submerged, and soon managed to get his head above the surface.

The worst of the flurry had passed and there was no trouble in keeping his place. His first glance, too, showed him Boxfield similarly blessed, and congratulatory words were exchanged.

Their escape had indeed been narrow.

As the water was left in a comparatively safe condition, they soon made an attempt to right the boat and succeeded. Two of the oars had held in the locks, having been fitted for such emergencies, and Doctor Rube unqualifiedly agreed with Boxfield when the latter gave it as his opinion that they were "lucky dogs."

"But," added the junior, "I reckon neighbor Griff has gone where good fishermen go."

"Or is a prisoner?"

"He isn't that. I saw him turn a hand-spring when the blizzard struck and then make a header in the water. I hate to tear up your faith in hair-breadth escapes, but I am inclined to think Mr. Griff is no more."

"And the abductors have escaped and taken away the madwoman."

"The Wild is certainly gone to seed, as I may express it. Her dark browed lover has stolen her from the parental castle and sped away o'er the blue sea like a meteor. The Wild is a goner and my best clothes are wet through. What'll the senior say when I appear at the forum of justice to-morrow?"

"Enough of nonsense. Can we do nothing for Griff?"

"That's about all we can do, though I dare say he would take it kindly if we were to go to his charming daughter and tell how he died in a good cause."

"I'll do this to-morrow. We'll give Griff a chance to appear and answer for himself if he has by any miracle escaped."

"Can you leave your patients to-morrow?"

"Will you never be serious?"

"I was about to add that the senior is not very busy now, and that he would probably spare me for this sad affair. Having had a good deal of experience I might manage to break it more gently to Miss Norola than you could."

The speaker's willingness to act as a sympathizer was commendable, but Doctor Rube made no hasty decision. Instead, they decided to look for Griff first of all.

CHAPTER XIX.

BOXFIELD BREAKS IT GENTLY.

THE following morning two demoralized-looking young men rolled out of bed and sat looking stupidly at each other. They were Doctor Rube and Boxfield, and the room was the former's chamber. They had returned in time for a degree of sleep, but it had not been enough to really rest them.

Their search of the previous night had failed to show them either Griff or the strangers.

"Well," said Boxfield after a pause, "we look like a pair of dried herrings after a spree. Eyes red and watery, heads of abnormal size, general superfluity of dirt. I see a good many such in court. They usually get off with ten dollars and costs."

"Ned," said the doctor seriously, "we must return and notify Norola of her father's fate. The forenoon is wearin' on rapidly and it is criminal to delay longer."

"Judging from a medical point of view, Grammatically speaking, is it correct to say we shall go, or I shall go, and break it gently to Norola?"

"We will both go," practically decided Doctor Rube.

And so they arose, breakfasted and were on the point of starting when a letter arrived for the doctor. Opening it, he read as follows:

"DOCTOR LEYDEN:—I wish to see you on important business and will deem it a great favor if you will call at ten o'clock, to-morrow forenoon. Please do not disappoint me. LEORA TEMPLETON."

Considerably surprised, Doctor Rube dropped the letter, which was impolitely seized and read by Boxfield.

"Whew!" he then whistled, equally surprised.

But Rube looked fixedly at vacancy and did not hear him. What did this summons mean? Had Leora heard of the proceedings begun against her in the name of Estner Alton and summoned him to try to stifle the truth?

His lips curled scornfully at the thought, but he was far from feeling like disappointing her in seeing him. He wished to know just what her object was in calling him to her, and it would be a pleasure to triumph over her after being snubbed as he had been at the ball.

Yes; it would undoubtedly give him satisfaction, though he felt mean at the thought of warring on a woman—at least, on one as pretty as Leora Templeton.

"Well?" questioned the junior.

"Ned, old man," quoth his friend, "I will indulge you. Go and see Norola alone, and I'll go to Miss Templeton."

The junior looked sulky for a moment, then brightened, crossed the office and gave Rube his hand.

"Done!" he said.

And so, half an hour later, they separated and each went his way. Each felt that he had a matter of importance on hand, and as Ned strode along he generously decided that if he could win Norola he would leave a clear field for Rube with Miss Templeton.

"For it's all nonsense for him to bate her and make such a show of ears," he characteristically said to himself.

For his own part he lost no time, but took his way toward Griff's cabin. At first he was in his usual buoyant spirits, but as he neared the place he began to lag. From Griff's remarks he had learned that St. Jerome's stock stood very low with Norola, and as she had once seen them together, it was not likely she would receive him—Ned—with open arms.

Still, he held what courage he found floating around loose, and approached the cabin.

When he arrived all was as usual, except that the kidnappers had left some traces not easily obliterated.

No one being in sight, the junior knocked at the door, and a sweet, feminine voice bade him enter. Knowing it was Norola he wavered for a moment, and then walked valiantly in.

Norola was alone. She sat idly in a chair, and her expression was mournful, but her courage seemed to have kept her up in doubt and sorrow. Her expression changed at sight of the visitor, and he bowed very low.

"Pardon me for intruding, miss," he said, "but I have come on business. I—I see you recognize me."

"Yes, sir," she answered, with cold politeness.

"Then I trust you will regard me as a—a friend," he continued, feeling like a school-boy. "I am sorry this occasion is not more cheerful."

"Really, sir, I don't understand," she said, with increased coldness.

"I have come to speak of last night," he added.

"Of last night?"

"Of the calamity, I mean."

"Ah! you refer to the infamous abduction of Miss Wild. So you know something about it. Perhaps you can tell me where she now is?"

"Unfortunately, I cannot; but it is not to her I refer," the junior gravely said, true to his purpose to break it gently. "I refer to a deeper calamity; in short, to your father. Prepare yourself for the worst."

"And what of my father?"

Unconsciously, Norola spoke with a severe abruptness, which completely put to flight what composure Boxfield had left. He forgot his resolution to break it gently, and plunged in headlong.

"He—he's dead!" was the startling announcement.

"Indeed! Permit me to inquire, sir, how you escaped?"

"Our boat was overturned by th—"

"I mean, escaped from the insane asylum."

The junior smiled in a feeble way.

"You are pleased to be witty ma'am," he said, "but that won't bring Griff to life. He was drowned in the gale last night, much to our regret, and I am here to break the sad news, and offer our sympathy. Whatever we can do practically we shall be glad to do, and the costs will be paid by the court."

Whom he meant by "we" the junior did not make clear; but for a maiden speech his effort was not bad—in his own opinion. He had scarcely finished, however, when the Banquo affair at the banquet was rivaled. There was a heavy step at one side, and when Boxfield turned he found himself face to face with Griff.

Yes, it was Griff; Boxfield could not forget his peculiar outlines; but as he was not superstitious it soon dawned upon him that it was Griff in the flesh.

The old fisherman looked stern and forbidding, and he raised one hand and shook a long finger at his caller.

"This hyer is ther fust time I ever heered my own obituary solemnized," he slowly said; "an' ef it's ter be bashed up in such ridic'ulous style, I never want ter live ter hear it ag'in. You hev devoted all ther spare time ter tellin' how bad you feel'd instead o' promulgatin' ther virtues an' philosophism o' ther deceased."

"I was coming to that," said Boxfield, rallying a little as he saw that Griff meditated no immediate violence.

"I hev my doubts ef you'd have did it; but that don't count. Why did you come hyer an' say I was dead?"

"Because I thought such the fact."

"Well, I may be, but I hev my doubts ag'in. Do I look like it? Hev I the pond-lily complexion of a defunct? Do you see any reason ter believe ef I was ter start a seminary that I'd be ther fust plant?"

"I perceive now that you are very lively for a dead man, but you must allow that I had good reason to believe you were lost. You do not seem to recognize me, so I will explain that I was one of your companions in the race last night. The other I can produce at any time. We thought you lost, and I came here to break it gent—I mean, to inform Miss Griff."

"Oh! did you? Well, you may be all right, but I hev my doubts. Ef you was with me last night, it's a wonder your face don't linger in my mind. All I know on you is that when you approached ther door my gal says ter me, 'Thar's one on 'em!' 'Who?' sez I. 'Ther chum o' ther skunk we think hev stole Ther Wild,' sez she. With that I got inter ambush—an' now you beave in an' tell my gal I'm defunct. That

may be all right, but, ez I said before, I hez my doubts—I hev 'em bad!"

Griff scowled and shook his head, and the junior saw that they really believed him a rascal of a sanguinary dye.

All this would amount to little in the end, for he could prove an *alibi* by Doctor Rube, and the senior would pull him through any ordinary scrape; but the more Norola frowned the more it occurred to Ned he would like to see her smile.

He finally persuaded Griff to sit down and listen to him; and then he told all he knew about affairs relating to the cabin, explaining how he first appeared with St. Jerome, and all the events of the previous night.

Griff was inclined to be stubborn, or, as he called it, "to have his doubts," but the frequent imploring glances Boxfield directed toward Norola were not without effect, and she finally suggested that Doctor Rube be visited as a means of settling the matter.

"You know, father Griff," she added, "this gentleman should have the benefit of the doubt."

The junior looked deeply grateful and very happy, but his brief candle went out as Griff remarked:

"He's got ther benefit o' my doub's, an' it's a reg'lar matinee, at that. He kin smile an' smile, but I'd hev my doubts ef he'd b'en introduced as a preacher; I would!"

Finding it impossible to convince him Boxfield tried no further then, but before they started for San Francisco he went to Norola and spoke in a straightforward way:

"Pardon me, but as I am aware that I appear to you in a very bad light I wish to ask you to suspend judgment and not regard me either as a villain or fool until you have further proof. If St. Jerome is the man you believe him to be, I am unlucky in having been associated with him in any degree, but I have neither been his ally or confidant."

"I believe you, sir," the girl impulsively answered, "and I must apologize for my rudeness when you arrived to-day."

"Do not mention that, Miss Norola, for I do not blame you. I confess that I have an ambition to be your friend, however, and if you can begin by tolerating me I am glad."

Boxfield was sincere; he even felt, as he looked into her beautiful face, that he would desert Leora Templeton for such a woman as this; and they sealed a truce, if not a friendship, by clasping hands.

Then Norola took Griff aside, when the two men were about to start for the city to visit Doctor Rube, and spoke a good word for the junior.

"He may be all right," the fisherman admitted, "but I hev my doubts. He sart'ly hain't proceeded 'bove-board an' squar', an' though he may mean well I has my doubts, as I said afore. I has 'em bad!"

CHAPTER XX.

DOCTOR RUBE UNDER FIRE.

It was with a strange mixture of contradictory emotions that Doctor Rube approached the Templeton house. He had told himself that Leora was a base, scheming adventuress, and he had loudly proclaimed his scorn for such people, but, somehow, he had made a careful toilet for the occasion and actually found himself hoping the interview might not be so very severe.

For, in spite of all that had since occurred, he had never outgrown the impression received when the girl lay on the bed in Diamond's house and her fair hand was placed in his for sacrifice.

Then, he had felt toward her as he had never done toward any other woman, and the feeling had never weakened. Weakened? On the contrary, it had grown apace in spite of disadvantageous circumstances.

On arriving at the Templeton house he was ushered in by a servant, but he had not been left alone a great while when Leora entered the room.

Doctor Rube arose and then stood in some embarrassment, for he scarcely knew how to greet a woman whom he was trying to deprive of a fortune. Her own manner soon settled the condition of affairs.

She bowed frigidly.

"Pray be seated, Doctor Levden," she said, icily. "I am glad to see you, though I am not hypocrite enough to pretend that this is due to friendship."

The doctor thought he could well believe it, as he noticed a strong sparkle about her eyes, but he bowed and replied:

"I have come at your summons."

"Yes," she answered; "I did summon you, and there seemed to be reason enough for it. I am informed, sir, that you are at the bottom of a plot to rob me of my inheritance. In brief, a certain J. Q. A. Smith, acting as attorney for one Esther Alton, has notified me that he disputes my right to Jacob Templeton's property, or, in plainer words, intends to prove in court that I am not myself!"

She spoke indignantly, and Doctor Rube felt most uncomfortable; but he resolved then and

there not to deviate from calm politeness at any stage of the interview.

"I had expected this," he acknowledged.

"Furthermore, I learn that Smith's principal witness is yourself."

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Do not be a hypocrite, sir!"

"I am not, Miss Templeton. I say 'unfortunately' because a sense of duty has led me to do what is most unpleasant. I bear you no ill-will, and I am sorry to war on a lady. Justice, however, has its demands."

"Do you call it justice to rob me of my property?"

"If it is really yours, I hope you may enjoy it all your life; but if, as is suspected, it belongs to Esther Alton, I hope to see her in possession of it," he firmly said.

Miss Templeton's foot beat audibly and nervously on the carpet.

"By what right do you assert that I am not Leora Templeton?" she asked.

"I do not assert it. I merely know of certain circumstances which I have thought fit to place in the hands of Mr. Smith. These facts cast a doubt on your claim, if you must bear the plain truth. Further than that I have nothing to do."

"Ah! Well, I have sent for you to learn what these suspicious circumstances are."

"Pardon me, Miss Templeton, but the matter is wholly in the hands of Mr. Smith. I am not at liberty to divulge anything."

"Perhaps you think you will yet want to manufacture additional evidence," she cried bitterly. "Do you think your schemes are impenetrable? Beyond a doubt Esther Alton has promised to marry you if you can steal the Templeton fortune for her."

Doctor Rube flushed deeply at the unjust accusation, and only preserved his temper by a strong effort.

"I wonder at your presumption," he said, with cold severity. "Considering the events of the past, your conduct is unparalleled. Do you imagine I can forget what occurred at the City of the Desert? Are the faces of Captain Diamond and yourself to be forgotten in a day? Madam, when I met you at the Aberdeen ball, and you refused to recognize me, I knew you had not forgotten my face. Your conduct was suspicious. Then later, when events took shape, how could I but suspect you?"

She looked at him in silence, and very earnestly, for several seconds.

"You still insist that we had met before the night of the ball?" she finally questioned.

"Naturally."

"And I deny it."

Doctor Rube silently inclined his head.

"Do you hear me?" she sharply demanded.

"I deny it!"

"I hear, Miss Templeton," he calmly answered.

"And hear with indifference. Well, what more can one expect of a man who persecutes a woman?"

"Miss Templeton, believe me, my position is a painful one."

"Believe you! Can you tell the truth?"

"We will not discuss that point, but I can at least terminate an interview where I am so contemptuously treated. If your business is done, I will go."

The proud, angry face before him changed expression and her lips quivered with real or feigned emotion.

"Forgive me," she said, "for I fear I was harsh and unladylike. I will acknowledge that at least. But I wish to talk further. Will you remain if I do not again transgress the laws of politeness?"

"Certainly, Miss Templeton."

"Then let me ask if you are sure I am the person you saw in that mysterious past of which I have asked a full account of late? May you not have been deceived by a chance resemblance?"

"I feel that such a thing is impossible," he replied, temperately, "but even if it were so, what of Mr. St. Jerome? Here I see the same man who figured in that old scene; the same man even to the superb diamond which sparkled at his bosom. His face, you must admit, is a peculiar one, and one not easily forgotten. He was the man I saw at the City of the Desert."

"Where is this place?"

"You ought to know as well as I, for my knowledge is limited. It is a mystic city, like the one in Yucatan which a traveler once saw, its walls blazing in the sun, and could never again find."

Miss Templeton smiled sarcastically.

"The traveler had probably taken too much wine. As for your mystic city, I know nothing about it; I was never there. I think I can say the same for Mr. St. Jerome. He is a gentleman and my friend, and those who accuse him of conspiring to help me gain a fortune by false pretenses may yet have a chance to answer for the libel."

Doctor Rube remained silent. He saw the folly of continuing the conversation and felt ashamed of quarreling with a lady. He felt sorry, too, to be against Leora Templeton. Her hold on him was as strong as ever, and if it

would not have looked so hypocritical he would have declared a hope that she might go through the fire unscathed.

"This trial must really go on, then?" she continued, after a pause.

"It rests with Miss Alton and her attorney."

"I shall see them."

"Doubtless the suit will be dropped if you can prove your claim to their satisfaction."

"Unfortunately, I have led such a roving life—"

She paused suddenly, as though aware that she had nearly committed a mistake, but the doctor gave no visible sign of having heard.

However, the interview was at an end, and they soon said good-day. Miss Templeton's manner was such that Doctor Rube went away feeling an actual sympathy for her; but it would have been shaken had he been able to look back and see her again.

Once alone, she stamped angrily on the carpet.

"The wretch!" she cried, excitedly. "The unmanly creature! If I was a man he should suffer for this, but he is not likely to escape. Mr. St. Jerome will look to him."

And then she sat down and wrote a note to the gentleman last named, asking him to call at once.

In the mean while, Doctor Rube went straight to his office. Two hours later Boxfield and Griff appeared, and when he had congratulated the latter on his escape the junior came to business.

"I am in need of a character," he said. "Being suspected of abduction, theft, assault and battery, and so on, it needs a strong light on my character to clear me. Mr. Griff thinks me a rascal."

"I don't say it," added the fisherman; "I don't say it. I merely hev my doubts."

He spoke with less confidence than before, for he had become favorably inclined toward Boxfield, in spite of his "doubts," and when Doctor Rube had told his story, he frankly begged his companion's pardon.

It was settled that Boxfield had not abducted The Wild, but what of St. Jerome? Griff remained steadfast to the suspicion advanced by Norola, and the doctor was ready to believe the man capable of any villainy. Ned wavered for a moment, but he would have favored any reasonable idea to have agreed with Norola and he ended by arraying himself with his companions.

Griff was of an impetuous nature and favored calling on St. Jerome to make a plain charge, but Doctor Rube advised a different course.

If St. Jerome had kidnapped The Wild—for which there seemed a good reason—he had undoubtedly concealed her somewhere where she could not easily be found. Hence, the way to find her was by the good old plan of still hunting.

It was finally settled that Boxfield should drop in on the suspected man and use his eyes somewhat; and then he went away and the others awaited his return.

We need scarcely repeat his report. St. Jerome was not a man to leave traces of a damaging nature, and Ned found him in immaculate dress and cheerful spirits; and while they talked the serpent's eye sparkled until it seemed to nod and wink jovially at the visitor.

St. Jerome betrayed nothing, but an astute private detective had been engaged to watch him before Griff left the city. If he knew where The Wild was they meant to know, also; though Griff was heard to say he had his doubts about the detective doing any good and "reckoned he could nose out a secret as quick as any biled-shirted seeker arter truth."

CHAPTER XXI.

BEN BOLTER HELPS HIMSELF.

THREE days passed without events of importance, though affairs were slowly moving on toward an end.

The Wild had not been found and the "biled shirt" detective had gained no clew. He had dogged St. Jerome, but that gentleman's conduct had been irreproachable.

Ben Bolter had not been arrested. The officers of the law were looking for him, but he wisely kept out of sight.

Doctor Rube went daily to see Mrs. Alton, though he no longer considered her in need of medical attendance. He had, however, become the friend of the two ladies and, as both had a rather poor opinion of law and lawyers, they asked his advice to a great extent. They believed in Mr. J. Q. A. Smith to a proper degree, but it was more pleasant to have a friend behind the scenes.

Toward Esther the doctor had begun to have a very brotherly feeling. She was good-looking, earnest, refined and intelligent, and he rather enjoyed having her confidence. What the future would bring forth no one could say.

The suit of Alton vs. Templeton was fairly under way, and as the latter was the possessor of a million dollars, a good deal of interest was felt in the case by all grades of society.

We need scarcely say that Doctor Rube went no more to the Templeton house. Once, Leora passed him by chance on the street, and her

dress touched him, but though she looked directly into his face there was no sign of recognition.

Boxfield had twice called at Griff's cabin to report from the detective, and each time he returned in high spirits. Norola was so gracious that he had decided to woo Leora no more, and he was already prepared to pronounce her a wily adventuress.

"Beyond a doubt she cabbaged the gold of Jacob Templeton, miser-millionaire, by sheer fraud," he said, to Rube; "and I fear my senior was in the game. He's so mad at the opposition that he roars like a trapped lion and his face is red as a lobster. I'm ashamed of being in with such a gang."

In the mean while Ben Bolter was a literal prisoner. Bully and ruffian that he was, he had a great dread of the law; and having no doubt but that Doctor Rube had given his description to the police, after the attempted murder, he kept his room almost as constantly as though barred in.

All this worried him. To use his own expression, he was a "bird o' ther outer air," and he growled and sulked in his room in spite of all that boon companions, cards and liquor could do to make him contented.

"Et is all ther fault o' that durned doctor," he said, for the hundredth time. "Why couldn't he die like a man when I chucked him in ther drink? Sech onkindness to me hurts my feelings."

And Mr. Bolter looked as grieved as a cast-iron mastiff.

"Summut must be done," he said, anon. "Captivity is ojus an' I can't stand it. I must go out, an' in order ter go out that doctor must get out ther way. Ef men was men, nowadays, somebody would knife him fur me, but ez they ain't I must knife him myself. That's ther way o' ther world; ef you want help, help yourself."

And thus it came about that Bolter asked one of his fellow criminals, who was also a scholar, to write a letter for him. This letter, reaching Doctor Rube's office, proved to be expressed as follows:

"DOCTOR LEYDEN:—If you want news in regard to the missing mad-woman, come to the Cervantes Hotel, Haverstraw. I know you by sight and will meet you there. I am willing to do what is fair."

"N. B.—Come alone or I shall not make myself known. A. B. C."

Having read this letter, Doctor Rube did just what almost any other man would have done; he went to the police and told the whole story, and the usual systematic plan was arranged for securing the writer.

The doctor took the train as directed, and, to all appearances, was alone, but in another car went three police officers, who were to take no visible notice of him, but "happen" around at the Cervantes Hotel at about the same time.

Doctor Rube settled down to his ride as philosophically as possible, and the train rattled up the San Joaquin valley, after leaving Stockton, at an express rate.

Darkness found him considerable short of Haverstraw, and they still lacked twenty miles of that place when the train stopped on a bleak stretch of land where no building was visible.

"What's the matter?" was the general inquiry, and then the travelers alighted to find a loose rail ahead of them.

"We'll have it fixed in fifteen minutes," said a train-hand, and then the passengers agreed that the whole affair was only a good joke.

The majority of them re-entered the cars, some watched the work on the rail, and still others strolled about to see what objects of interest the vicinity afforded.

Among the latter class was Doctor Rube, who lit a cigar and strolled around in an absent-minded way. A dark object near at hand attracted his attention, and, on closer acquaintance, proved to be a mound of uncertain age.

He started to walk around it, but had only reached the further side when he met two men. One of them thrust a revolver against his breast with machine-like coolness.

"Not a motion, or you are a dead man!" he exclaimed.

It was an ominous warning, but the doctor did not see fit to obey. It flashed upon him that he had been trapped, and with a quick, upward movement he flung aside the revolver, while at the same instant his other hand came out holding his own six shooter.

One thing only prevented music then. His pistol-hand was seized in a tenacious grip, while a second pair of arms encircled his waist, pinning down both his own arms, and though he struggled furiously for a moment it was all in vain.

"Better let up," said one of his first assailants with a chuckle. "It ain't no sorter use."

"Ben Bolter!" exclaimed the doctor.

"Ben Bolter, I am, my pill maker. Make a note on't an' remember my style, fur ef you howl I'll scatter your seven wits. I've got ye ag'in, an' this time ye stay."

Beyond a doubt Mr. Bolter was as much in

earnest as is the rattlesnake when he strikes out with his venomous fangs, but Doctor Rube retained his presence of mind.

He pretended to make light of the matter, and to regard it as a joke, and Ben let him talk because he wished to kill time until the train started.

In the midst of it all, however, another person came around the mound and Bolter and his friends aroused.

"A woman!" cried the leader. "Stop her tongue!"

One of the men did it with a promptness which prevented any alarm and they had another prisoner on their hands. They were still in doubt what to do with her when a loud voice from beside the train called out, "All aboard!" and no choice was left in the matter. It would not do to let her return and spread the alarm.

Thus, the train went on and the party by the mound stayed behind.

"We ain't goin' ter Haverstraw ter-night, we ain't," said Bolter. "Es fur that letter, I'm ther man you started to meet, an' I reckon you hev met me!"

There was something very ominous about the observation, but Doctor Rube did not think of that. He clearly saw that the displaced rail had been a part of Ben Bolter's game; and he saw, too, that the three police officers would go on to Haverstraw without suspecting what had occurred by the way.

Bolter had made arrangements for leaving the mound as soon as the train was gone, but he saw an unexpected addition to his party in the shape of a woman, and he scarcely knew how to proceed.

Bidding some of his followers take the doctor aside, he went to the one who was holding the woman, and motioned to him to remove his hand from her mouth.

"You kin scream now, my pretty," he said, with grim playfulness. "Ther train is gone, an' it won't do any harm ter stir up ther echoes a few. I'll give ye five minutes for feminine screams."

"I decline to scream," she answered, with commendable coolness. "If you want to do me a favor, let me go."

"You don't deserve it. It's all your own fault you're hyer. We didn't want you. This durned ole mound must have a powerful traction ter draw ye hyer. Wall, you're in fur it an' must face ther music. You'll know better next time."

Mr. Bolter had made his decision, and he turned away and spoke to one of his men, who went aside and soon returned with five horses.

There was one for each person except the woman, who had not been expected, but Ben took her on his own saddle.

She was sensible enough to see the folly of resistance, and made no unnecessary words.

Doctor Rube was placed on his horse with his hands tied behind him, the same cord being passed under the animal. Then, when the rein was taken by a stout ruffian, he seemed perfectly helpless.

Taking this view of the case he devoted his first spare time to surveying his companion in captivity.

A fortunate choice of position gave him the desired chance, their eyes met and a simultaneous recognition followed.

The woman was Leora Templeton!

Greatly surprised, he saw her make a start which expressed the same emotion, but neither spoke. Perhaps they had a dim idea that it would be just as well to give no sign.

After a few minutes Doctor Rube grew suspicious. This meeting seemed something more than chance, and he found himself wondering if he did not owe his captivity to the girl. In this case her own was a sham, but that had not been hard to manage.

"Ay, that's it!" he thought; "they mean to get the chief witness out of the way. My lady has trapped me, and I dare say I shall be fed to the vultures as a punishment for meddling with a million dollars."

It was a natural decision, but it wavered when he looked at the rough brutes around him. Surely, no such girl as Leora Templeton would willingly risk herself in such company; even the bond of mutual interest would not make it safe.

He was not given much time for thought, for Bolter rode still nearer to him.

"Pill-maker," he said, swaggeringly, "this ride is ter be a short one. When it ends your life will be like a clock 'most run down. It'll tick mighty feeble. You'll be so nigh your grave that you'll feel ther damp. I say this so you kin say yer prayers ef you know any. They're said ter be a free pass on ther railroad o' ther hereafter, an' 'll work in convenient. Tany rate, critter, you hev got ter die!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DOCTOR AS A GRAVE-DIGGER.

THERE was no reason to believe Bolter was joking, and as he edged away at the end of his ominous statement, Doctor Rube was left to thoughts anything but pleasant. It looked very

much as though he had got to wind up his connection with the world, and men don't take kindly to such things as a rule.

Did, or did he not, owe his present trouble to Miss Templeton? Was she a genuine prisoner, like himself, or had she resolved to remove the man who stood between her and a fortune, even at the price of a life?

The last idea looked more likely to be true than the first, and yet—

Doctor Rube felt a keen pang. If this woman was all bad it was enough to destroy faith in human nature.

Ben Bolter at last ordered a halt, and the entire party dismounted, the prisoners being freed from bonds.

"How tall are you?" he asked, addressing the doctor.

"Five feet, ten," was the wondering reply.

Ben took a spade, which one of his men had produced, and passed it along to Doctor Rube.

"Dig a hole six feet long, an' three wide," he directed.

"For what purpose?"

"For a grave!"

"For whom?"

"For whichever on us dies fust."

The doctor could not doubt what the ruffian had in his mind; but his expression did not change. He held the spade he had mechanically taken, and continued to look at Bolter.

"Wall, be you goin' ter do it?" the fellow roughly asked.

"Yes."

Doctor Rube spoke calmly and, removing his coat, drove the spade into the soft soil and threw up the first amount. The rest of the party stood in a circle around him, as though to prevent escape. He could see that the men grinned as though a rare joke was in progress, but Leora's face was in the shadow. She seemed to watch closely, but he could not tell with what emotion.

For his own part he worked steadily, though without haste. It was the first authenticated case which had ever come under his notice where a man had dug his own grave, but he did not intend to go very deep. His obedience had arisen, not from mere cowardice, but from a desire to gain time in which to form his plans.

So he turned over the sods and threw up the finer dirt below, not pausing to think that it was a solemn affair, but wondering how he could avoid its being a tragic one.

He could think of but one way; to attack his four enemies single handed, using the spade for the first blow and then making it a fight for life or death.

The occasion furnished a good deal of merriment for the ruffians, and especially for Ben Bolter. The latter chuckled as each spadeful of earth was thrown up, and indulged in divers jokes at the expense of the "pill maker," little suspecting that his branded victim was soon to turn at bay.

Doctor Rube marked his time and, stooping as though to raise more dirt, he suddenly changed the direction of his spade and dashed it full in Bolter's face.

The blow would have felled an ox, and Bolter made an eccentric acrobatic flight through the air for a few feet and then struck the ground with a dull thud.

Before the sound came, however, Doctor Rube, moving with wonderful quickness, had snatched a revolver from the belt of his nearest foe and emptied a bullet in its owner's body; after which he turned to contend with the other two.

As he did so there was another report and one of them pitched into the grave beside him, while the only remaining one made a flying leap, gained a horse's back and sped away in the darkness. One bullet Doctor Rube managed to send after him, but it went wide or he out-rode it.

The doctor scarcely knew the result; he was looking blankly at Miss Templeton, who was standing beside the grave with a revolver in her hand.

"You—you—this fellow—" he stammered, pointing to the man who had fallen into the grave.

"I shot him," she coolly answered.

There could be no doubt about it, and he impulsively put out his hand.

"You're a heroine!" he exclaimed.

But she disregarded both compliment and hand.

"We seem to be masters of the field," she said, in the same even way.

"Yes; we've made a clean sweep," he answered, withdrawing his declined hand. "I have to thank you for timely aid in my fight."

"Don't mention it; I was only looking out for myself. I'll not thank you, for I know you wouldn't have risked anything for me. Our interests happened to be mutual and we worked together; that's all. Don't let us be hypocritical or sentimental."

Doctor Rube's face flushed in spite of his sturdy manhood. So keen a rebuff at such a critical moment was enough to upset even a stoic. Pride came to his rescue, however, and he laughed in an unnatural way.

"Have it as you will," he said. "I'll now look to our prostrate enemies."

Two of them were past the aid of a doctor's skill. The man Rube had shot had never known what hurt him, and Ben Bolter's skull was crushed. He still lived, but his present insensibility would speedily end in death.

Miss Templeton's target was better off. He was losing a good deal of blood from a ragged wound on his scalp, and was insensible, but there was no reason why he should not live another twenty years so far as the wound was concerned.

"Well, what are we going to do now, Miss Templeton?" the doctor asked, anon.

"I can't answer for you; I am going on to Haverstraw."

"To Haverstraw?"

"Yes."

"It is twenty miles. Will you allow me to see you safely there?"

"If you choose to take that direction, I cannot prevent you."

Doctor Rube had learned her mood, and he was neither surprised nor mortified by this ungracious reply.

"I have been taught to do all in my power to oblige and protect a lady," he said, with emphasis. "I shall avail myself of your offer, and if you do not allow me to ride beside or near you, I shall keep near enough to give my humble aid in case new danger menaces you."

Something—it may have been the straightforward manliness of the reply—seemed to touch and confuse the girl. For a moment she was at a loss for an answer, and then she replied in a voice less cold than before:

"You teach me my duty, sir. I am a woman and alone in a strange and lawless place, and that alone should make me grateful for your offer, even if I had no cause to thank you for rescuing me. Let us forget our—our lack of friendship and go on."

"I will prepare the horses," said Doctor Rube cheerfully, too wise to press his slight victory.

And so they mounted and, taking the extra horses, left Ben Bolter and his companions where they lay. The doctor had looked again at Ben, finding him forever done with the world. The fellow in the half-dug grave was the luckiest of the three, for the grave sometimes gives up its living, if not its dead.

Doctor Rube and the girl rode on. Their position was a peculiar one, and for a time neither of them spoke. Enemies that they were, the fate which placed them so strangely seemed a bitter mockery. Rube felt that it would be audacity on his part to begin even an ordinary conversation, for, though this woman was an adventuress, she was a woman still.

If he had thought less on this subject and more on the vital one of going in a direct line toward the railroad track it would have been better for them. He finally halted abruptly.

"Isn't it about time we reached the track?" he asked, aloud.

"The same question has just entered my own mind."

He peered sharply ahead in the darkness.

"Can it be that we have wandered from the direct course?"

"Let us ride on and see."

They went for ten minutes and then again paused. The fact could no longer be disguised that they had gone much further than would have been necessary had they gone in a direct line.

Doctor Rube looked at the heavens; the entire sky was overcast.

"I must confess I don't know one point of the compass from another," he said, with chagrin. "Nor I."

They looked at each other in silence for a moment. Neither knew aught of the country about them. It was of a generally level nature, but not a light was visible; so far as they knew no settlement except Haverstraw was near, and in attempting to find that they were liable to go the wrong way.

"We must go on," the girl finally said.

"You had better use your judgment this time," he said, shrewdly. "Please take the lead."

"I should surely wander in a circle; it is useless for me to try."

"Well, lacking a star or anything else to guide us, the only way my limited wisdom can discern is to utilize the breeze. It is slight, it is true, but I believe it will enable us to keep a direct course, which is better than to wander in a circle."

And so they went on side by side. It was a very silent ride. Miss Templeton did not seem in a mood for talking and the doctor would not press his society upon her. He felt that she must hate him, but in spite of that, and the fact that she was an adventuress, and the fact that he had vaguely wondered when coming up in the train if he had not better ask Esther Alton to be his wife—in spite of all, he felt that old, strong fascination.

The silent ride was awkward, but perhaps it was as agreeable as that nightmare of society, forced conversation.

And so they went on, hour after hour, never seeing a light or a human being; never seeing a

star by which to guide their course, and without a change in their singular relation toward each other.

A truce had been silently agreed upon, but they were enemies still. Doctor Rube wondered, in a stupid way, if Miss Templeton would not be glad to see him shot down by some skulking foe, but the skulking foe evidently had other business on his hands that night.

But the ride had an end, as all earthly rides must, and just as the girl had unconsciously breathed a deep sigh of weariness Doctor Rube started with a sincere pleasure and, pointing ahead, exclaimed:

"A light, by Jupiter!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE PRAIRIE RANCH.

THE discovery acted like magic on both the riders, for both were anxious to see their existing relation toward each other terminated, but Leora looked at the light with some doubt.

"There is but one; can it be from a village?" she asked.

"At this hour a village wouldn't show many, if any at all; but I frankly admit that I have but little hope we are near one. I judge that this is a grazing district, and the light may proceed from the house."

A nearer approach showed the latter view to be correct. A lone set of buildings was all that was to be seen. Still, they could undoubtedly obtain shelter for the night, and Leora showed a good deal of relief. Doctor Rube, having seen enough of Western life to be aware that many rough characters existed there, hoped they might prove to be near a village.

He found a door near the window from which showed the light, and after repeated rapping it was opened by a sleepy-looking man in a red shirt and ragged pants. Beyond these, his attire was simple.

A brief conversation took place, and Doctor Rube learned that they were twelve miles from the nearest village—and double that distance from Haverstraw.

The man in the red shirt offered the shelter of the house, and Rube reluctantly accepted. For himself he had no fear, since he had nothing to attract robbers, but the man of the house had a rough, lawless and forbidding look, which made him look like anything but a desirable host.

He said he had good quarters for the lady, however, and Leora was anxious to stop.

At this stage of affairs an old woman appeared beside the man, and the girl went with her, while Rube and the man proceeded to stable the horses. The way in which the animals were scanned by the unknown was not encouraging, and reminded the doctor that gold and jewels were not the only thing to tempt desperadoes.

They re-entered the house, and Doctor Rube was shown to a room where the old woman was entertaining Leora. Man and wife made a most villainous-looking couple, and though they were outwardly anxious to do all in their power for their unexpected lodgers, Rube took the first opportunity to speak aside to Leora, and state his doubts.

"I see nothing suspicious," she answered. "Because they are rough it does not follow that they are wicked. They seem very kind."

"Your views may be correct; but if I ever saw a hang-dog face, it is Jake's; while as for his wife, she looks like a particularly hideous Hecate."

"They are well enough for me," she perterly answered.

"Still," he said, firmly, growing more fixed in his vague doubts as she grew stubborn in the opposite direction, "I would suggest that we don't retire to-night. If we sit here I shall be able to save you from possible danger."

"What nonsense!" she exclaimed. "You have the most absurd ideas of any person I ever saw; I have seen your fashion before now. Sit up! Most certainly not. I intend to retire at once."

"If you think you're among congenial companions, do so," he very ungallantly retorted; and then they went apart and maintained a sulky silence until Jake's wife announced that "the lady's" room was ready.

The women went out, leaving Jake and the doctor alone.

"My hired men are in the next room," said Jake. "Mebbe you'd like ter step in an' see 'em. They're playin' poker an' sich games."

It was a chance to see the remainder of the household which was not declined. They went and found four men at a table, busy over cards, pipes and a black bottle. They were fit mates for Jake in outward appearance, but they welcomed the stranger heartily and went on with their playing.

Doctor Rube sat down and surveyed the scene. He had resolved not to do any sleeping, and as long as he could keep awake in company he felt safe. He was invited to play, but as he had but five dollars in his pocket, prudently declined.

An hour passed, but no one showed an inclin-

ation to retire. The men continued to handle the cards and Jake dozed in a corner. Doctor Rube smoked and awaited the end of the night.

The place would have been perfectly quiet except for the conversation of the card players and one other sound which was not so easily understood by Doctor Rube. It proceeded from the room directly over his head and puzzled him a good deal. It was not unlike the noise made by the sweep of a heavy silk dress, only louder; but as it was not likely the house had ever seen a silk dress, or a dress with a trail, this possibility was not to be regarded.

But all the while Doc or Rube sat there the same sound was to be heard. Sweep—sweep—sweep! What did it mean, and what occasioned it? He asked himself the question again and again, but always vainly. Still the sound continued regularly, and he sat and listened with peculiar interest.

Somehow, it reminded him of a caged tiger pacing, time and again, the narrow limits of his place of confinement. He had watched such an animal often in the past and always with a species of fascination. The dogged, unchanging face, the wonderfully muscular body, the power of mischief pent up by the iron bars, the unwearying, monotonous pacing, back and forth, uncounted times—all this Doctor Rube had observed, and now this brushing, sweeping sound above reminded him of the striding tiger.

He wondered what it was, but refrained from asking questions, and time crept on without an explanation.

The doctor's gaze had wandered over the room scores of times. He knew the position of each chair and almost every other article. He knew, too, that the door had been closed, and when he saw it ajar his curiosity was aroused.

He looked closely and saw a human face in the opening; the face of a man of middle age, and that, too, as unprepossessing as were Jake and his friends.

This man was watching the card-players and the doctor had ample chance to observe him. He looked, accordingly, and in looking recognized him.

Unless he was greatly mistaken, he was that one of Ben Bolter's gang who had escaped when the affray beside the grove went against Benjamin.

The discovery was a startling one, but Doctor Rube's nerves were too good for him to make any foolish start. Instead, he kept his place and, after that, observed his neighbor through half-closed eyes.

Yes, his first impression had been correct, the man was Bolter's late companion.

The doctor now had fresh food for thought. What was the fellow doing at the house? Plainly, he had not come in after his own arrival, and the fact that he had come first and then seen fit to attempt to keep out of sight looked suspicious.

Many other questions the doctor asked himself, and then he settled down to a decision. The man was among friends and birds of a feather; the house was a den of cut-throats and he and Miss Templeton were fairly in their midst.

The decision was not a pleasant one and he would have given a good deal to have her away. This was easier thought of than done, however, and he knew he must maintain an unruffled composure.

The man at the door kept his place. He was watching the card-players and believed himself invisible. Jake still dozed in his corner. On the floor above, the sweep, sweep, sweep continued, as though the grim-faced panther would never tire of his game. And the night wore on.

Anon, Jake aroused, yawned, arose, advanced to Rube's side and intimated that if he wanted to retire he would show him a bed; an offer Rube promptly accepted because he hoped it would place him nearer Miss Templeton. They had separated in increased ill-humor, but he felt bound to protect her until San Francisco, or some other place, was reached.

So he followed Jake and was conducted to an unfinished, almost unfurnished, chamber where the wind circulated freely through a window which contained no glass.

Here Jake left him, but the change was not unpleasant. Jake's face inspired visions of galls, and the like, which were not wholesome.

After an investigation of his quarters which revealed nothing of interest, the doctor sat down to pass the night as best he could. The panther-like sounds had ceased, silence reigned all around, so far as he could hear, and a dull watch became his lot.

Another hour passed. Doctor Rube had scarcely stirred for some time, but he suddenly showed signs of life and sniffed at the air like a war-horse. There was an odor which he did not like; it was too much like smoke to please him.

He looked from his window, but, seeing smoke ascending from the chimney, returned to his seat. Several minutes passed and then he again arose. The odor had grown stronger and he was no longer willing to accept a natural explanation.

He laid hold of his door and tried to open it, but his efforts were resisted. Perceiving that it was fastened on the other side he brought his

shoulder into play and, by a strong effort, he lurched it open.

A good deal of rubbish had been piled against it, but as he pushed all aside he saw what startled him.

A bright light illuminated the passageway, and the air was full of smoke, all of which he would have known sooner had it not been for the rubbish which clogged his door.

It flashed upon him that the thieves among whom he had fallen had planned to burn him alive, but before he could make a further move a furious pounding sounded at a door near at hand.

Believing it was Leora he ran to the spot, and finding it secured by a wooden bar, he cast it off and the door flew open.

A human being darted through, and Rube stood amazed; it was none other than The Wild—Griff's mad *protégé*. One moment the doctor saw her, her looks wilder than ever, and then she sped past like an arrow, and disappeared before he could lay hands on her.

She left behind, however, a room which was full of fire and smoke, and he comprehended two things. It was she who had made the strange sweeping sounds, and she who had started the fire.

Recovering his wits, he ran after her. She had gone up still another flight of stairs, but when he followed he found himself on the roof, and The Wild was nowhere visible. He paused to make sure that this was a fact, and then retraced his steps.

The fire had made alarming progress. The material of the house seemed very dry and tinder like, and the flames had seized upon almost every part of the house.

Remembering Miss Templeton, he called her name, and a faint voice seemed to answer. He looked in vain for a door; the smoke blinded him and he groped in vain. He shouted again, however, and then some one appeared in the pall of smoke.

An instant before, Doctor Rube had been almost mad with horror. All the old fascination Leora Templeton had held over him returned and increased ten fold. The flame which touched her fair form would rend his own heart.

He was still raging when he saw her through the smoke. He uttered a shout of joy. She stretched out her arms, gasped, staggered, and would have fallen had he not caught her.

Then she lay in his arms pale and motionless, and with a wild impulse he pressed repeated kisses on her lips.

"My darling—oh, my darling!" he cried, "speak to me; in mercy's name, speak! You are suffocating—dying—"

He aroused just in time, and with the smoke hanging thicker than ever above them, caught her in his arms and started for the stairs.

He never really realized how he escaped from the house; beyond a vague, wild fancy of battling with smoke and flames for hours, of getting heavy falls, and encountering countless obstacles he had no idea of the terrible affair; but escape he did, and at last he was under the open sky with the pure air about him, with Leora in his arms and neither of them severely touched by the flames.

Afterward, he regarded the latter fact but little short of a miracle.

But had the girl as successfully escaped suffocation? He was anxiously asking himself the question, when he saw Jake and his men hurrying toward them.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE DOCTOR AT BAY.

THERE was something angry and ominous about the manner of the men which caused the doctor to pause in the midst of his investigations, and make sure his weapons were in place. He arose, too, when one of the men cried:

"Here ther durned critter is; we've got him."

Doctor Rube looked at the man, and recognized the survivor of the fight by the grave; but Jake then claimed his attention.

"I say, you, what d'ye mean by that?"

He spoke angrily, and pointed to the house, which was then all in flames.

"What do you mean?" Rube calmly asked. He foresaw trouble, with the odds against him; but he did not intend to make a bad matter worse by losing his self-possession.

"Why did you sot fire ter my house?"

"I did not set fire to it. On the contrary, I had nothing to do with it, and was nearly burned alive myself."

"Now, don't ye say that," cautioned his old acquaintance. "I saw ye do it; I saw ye apply the match. You burnt up Jake's house; you did. And that ain't ther wu'st, you killed Ben Bolter."

"So I did, and I'm only sorry you wasn't in the same lot. If you had stayed I'd been happy to have seen you next."

Considerable empty talk followed, in which Jake and his men pretended to be honest fellows, who had stumbled on a great rascal in the shape of Doctor Rube; and then they announced

their intention of hanging him to the barn as a warning to other evil doers."

All this was a mere farce, which Doctor Rube would have cut short by a few sarcastic words had he been alone; but Miss Templeton lay at his feet, and he felt that delay was precious; it might bring honest men to the spot.

But it ran its length at last, and Jake briskly directed his men to advance, and seize their marked victim.

"Stand back!" warned Doctor Rube. "It is death to the man who tries to take me. Stand back!"

He held a cocked revolver in each hand, and faced them without wavering.

"Drop ther barkers!" growled Jake, angrily.

"I repeat that I'll shoot the man who tries to touch me. Stand back!"

Jake ran his hand into his pocket.

"Two kin play at that game, I—"

"Hold!" commanded Doctor Rube. "Try to draw that revolver, and I'll shoot you as I would a wolf. I say the same to all of you. My weapons need but the touch of a finger to speed death among you; yours are in your pockets. I hold the drop; let me alone, or die!"

It was a thrilling picture to see the single man facing the five stout ruffians so bravely. Each one of them was a hard fighter; but Doctor Rube would not have been cooler had they been school-boys. Yet, he knew his life hung as by a thread, and his chances of living through the trouble were few and small.

He had no more time to look at Leora; but he kept near her side, and resolved to die there before one of the ruffians should place his unhallowed hands upon her.

There was a pause on the part of the ruffians. Five to one they were, but there was a general impression that the man who moved first would never move afterward. No one was greedy for this honor.

It is a well-known fact that the bearing of one brave man can waver, or quell, a mob; and one half the courage seemed to go out of those valiant five.

Once more Jake opened his mouth and gave his opinions, but though he talked bravely he lacked the confidence before observed.

Doctor Rube did not let his attention wander for a moment, and he soon had cause to believe this talk but a blind.

He saw one of the ruffians working his hand into his pocket and out again; but though he suspected what it meant, he did not try to stop it.

He was among desperate men, and intended to deal with them accordingly.

The house was entirely wrapped in the grasp of the flames, and a plain light fell over the group in front of it—so plain that Doctor Rube caught a glitter when his would-be crafty neighbor pulled out a revolver.

It had glittered but once when one of the doctor's revolvers spoke, and then it went toppling to the ground.

Its late holder had a shattered arm for his reward.

"Take warning!" said Doctor Rube; "when I fire next it will be to kill!"

He would have saved them, but they would not have it so.

Maddened by the blood they saw on the broken arm, they sprung forward like hungry wolves, and with cries in keeping:

"Down with him!"

"Kill the critter!"

Doctor Rube did not waver. He had time to give them a shot from each revolver, and he fired to kill, before they touched him. Then he was beaten down by their weight, and a desperate struggle began.

It was almost as confused as his fight with the flames. He found what seemed to be a multitude of enemies to confront, but striking out resolutely, did his best to hold his own.

In the midst of it his enemies suddenly receded. He gathered his strength, sprung to his feet and looked eagerly around.

Other men had arrived on the scene, and he saw his late assailants struggling in their hands. Honest men had arrived, and he was saved.

But he thought only of Leora.

He turned toward her, and was surprised, but pleased, to see another man helping her to her feet. She had recovered consciousness and did not look to be greatly injured.

Their eyes met, Rube's eager expression faded and then he turned away. He went near her no more while they remained on the place.

What followed may be briefly told. The house was doomed, and no attempt was made to save it. Besides, it was the property of a man long suspected of being a villain, and they would not have risked much for him.

The new-comers, who were men of Haverstraw—the village was but two miles away, after all—held a consultation, and then gave Jake and his men six hours to get out of the neighborhood. After that the honest men returned to Haverstraw, taking Doctor Rube and Leora with them.

The doctor kept away from the girl all the way to the town, but when its houses were reached she called him to her side.

"I owe you another debt of gratitude," she said. "I do not know what fate makes it so. I ought to hate you, for you are trying to rob me of my just inheritance, but you put debt after debt of gratitude upon me. What you have done for me to night I will not try to enumerate, but, believe me, I am duly aware and grateful for all."

"Pardon me," he courteously replied, "but I do not wish you to feel that I have placed you under any debt. You would not have had any trouble to-night had you not chanced upon the men who were my foes, not yours. I have barely done my duty and deserve no thanks. To be truthful, I had rather not be thanked, for you make me regret what I have done to deprive you of your fortune. Right or wrong, I am sorry I ever lifted my hand in the matter. I wish I had never seen you!"

Beginning well, his feelings overmastered him at the end and he spoke with a fretful moodiness. Leora looked at him steadily.

"No doubt you have been sincere in the matter," she said, "but you have been wrong. I am the true Leora Templeton. You have done injustice to both myself and Mr. St. Jerome."

Doctor Rube's face had expressed doubt and uneasiness, but at the last words the expression fled. Jealousy took the place of doubt.

"You have overdone the matter now, madam," he said, brusquely. "You possess the fascination to blind people to your own defects, but you cannot clear the record of St. Jerome. That scoundrel will yet be hung, and the sooner the better for the country."

"He is a gentleman," she declared.

"Then, deliver me from being one."

"There is no danger for you, sir."

"I bow to my fate; no doubt you are infallible."

"I am at least just."

"A matter which the court will decide when the case of Alton vs. Templeton is called."

"Doctor Leyden," she answered, leaning toward him and lowering her voice, "I would willingly take my chances again in all the peril I have escaped to-night if I could wipe out the debt I owe you. For—I hate you!"

She spoke the last words vehemently, and at the last touched her horse and rode away beside the man who was waiting to show her to the hotel.

As for Doctor Rube, he went to a cabin and slept on the rudest of beds rather than go where he would be likely to meet her again.

"I wish to meet her just once more," he thought, wrathfully, "and that at the trial. When the verdict is given in I do not think she will be so scornful. I shall live to see you quite humble, my lady—and yet, I would give every dollar I possess if I could withdraw my charge!"

Inconsistent human nature!

The following day the doctor took the train back to San Francisco. No one had come to the Cervantes Hotel to meet him and there could be no doubt but that it was a trap set by Ben Bolter—and his last on earth.

As for The Wild, she had not been seen since Doctor Rube liberated her from the prison-room, and it was believed she had perished in the fire.

He went back to the city in a miserable mood and went at once to J. Q. A. Smith's office. He found Griff with the lawyer and the latter in high spirits.

"I believe," he said, "that we are at last in a fair way to find your City of the Desert. Mr. Griff is an old Arizona pioneer, as I accidentally learned from him to-day; and he believes he has seen your blooming valley, shut in by the horseshoe hills and fronted by the smoking mountain."

"Well, what about it?" Rube sulkily asked.

"A good deal about it. I have for some time foreseen that unless the jury in the case of Alton vs. Templeton has a pretty big throat it will never swallow your yarn about the mystic city which nobody can find. Miss Templeton is rich and well known; you are a stranger here. Result, old Beesinger will prance around and laugh at you until the jury will believe you a champion liar."

"Well, what of it?"

"What of it? Why, sir, I would probably lose my case."

Doctor Rube narrowly escaped saying he wished the case was in Halifax, or some other remote court, but he checked himself and grandly said he comprehended.

"Now," continued J. Q. A. Smith, "the scene changes. I'm going to send a select party to find the City of the Desert and prove it a thing of fact. Mr. Griff will guide it, and you shall be an honorary member."

"Merely to find the city?"

"Possibly you can kidnap some of the Black Riders."

"Not very likely. On the other hand, I doubt if Mr. Griff can find the place."

"My name is Griffith Strong, with no front's-piece," said that gentleman, explanatorily. "Ez fur ther Smoky Mountain, I'll bet my hat I kin find it. Ther wa'n't no town thar, nary resident, then, but ther landscape war thar, an' I hev my doubts ef they've changed much."

"Will you make one of the party?" Smith continued, as Doctor Rube remained silent.

"Yes; count me in, by all means."

He spoke with alacrity, for he felt as though he would be glad to shake the dust of San Francisco forever from his feet. He was also foolish enough to think that he would confer a great favor on Leora by going off to die on the Arizona desert; foolish, because he wouldn't have accepted the most favorable chance to die, being of a more tenacious and sensible nature.

But it was settled that the City of the Desert should be proved to be something more than a creation of his brain, and the party left the city the following morning. Who went, and what befell them on the way will be seen a little later in this chronicle.

CHAPTER XXV.

NEWS FROM CAPTAIN DIAMOND.

It was evening and Mr. St. Jerome, *alias* Diamond sat alone in his room. He was outwardly calm, as he always was, except when one of two persons settled heavily upon him, and as he smoked complacently his diamond sparkled in the old way.

While he was thus engaged the door opened and some one entered. He looked up and saw Iron-Armed Abe, but he showed no surprise and did not stir.

The hunchback calmly closed the door, advanced to the table and sat down facing St. Jerome. He did not speak, but, leaning his elbows on the table, stared at him in grim silence.

It seemed remarkably strange to see deadly enemies take such a course, but they had always been peculiarly situated toward each other.

St. Jerome did not stop smoking, and the serpent's eye glittered hostilely, but patiently.

"Well, King Diamond," said Abe at last, "we meet again."

"Undoubtedly."

"Time deals gently with us; knife, revolver and disease pass us by."

"Yes," sullenly answered Diamond.

"Every thing has an end, and one of these days one of us will go off life's stage. The end is near!"

Diamond moved restlessly and thought of The Wild.

"I have been looking into your present scheme, King Diamond; that which took you from the City of the Desert, and I find it to be a game for a million dollars. But what a million dollars can amount to in your estimation, with the City of the Desert under your thumb you perhaps know; I don't."

"What are you talking about?" Diamond brusquely asked.

"The Templeton million and your attempt to deprive the lawful heiress of her own. More than that I don't know, I have not been able to grasp all the points of your game; but, judging by that episode at your desert kingdom, you're in dead earnest."

"Bah!" said Diamond, contemptuously. "The Templeton million is of no consequence."

"Yet you are doing your best to get it."

"I am, or, rather, I have it already. I'll have and keep it in spite of all California."

"Personal spite, I suppose," the hunchback observed. "Well, go ahead; it'll all be one when I foreclose on you."

Diamond pulled at his long mustache and scowled blackly at his enemy, and the serpent's eye glanced with increased brilliancy.

"Why do you persist in following me year after year?" he morosely demanded. "Will you never be satisfied? My men at the desert town call you Iron-Armed Abe, the Destroyer. You have slain many of their fellows. Why? In what way do you strike me?"

"I show you my power," was the somber reply; "I show you that when I see fit I can crush you like the vile wretch you are. Years ago I said a quick death was too good an end for you. I swore you should suffer as you made *her* suffer, and I have kept my word. I swore to kill you at the end, and I have kept myself near you to remind you of your approaching fate. I have been your shadow; I have gone where you went, appearing often when least expected, and always like a ghost at the banquet; some day I shall appear and take your life, King Diamond!"

The younger man brushed his hand nervously across his forehead as though a cold sweat hovered there.

"You are a demon!" he exclaimed.

The Hercules smiled darkly.

"I am the avenger of a foul wrong," he said.

Captain Diamond rested his elbows on the table and his face within his hands, while the serpent's eye, dimly visible between his wrists, was like a thing in ambush.

"Do you bear a charmed life?" he demanded. "I have tried for years to kill you—always in vain."

The hunchback coolly drew a revolver and passed it over the table.

"Now is your time," he said.

But Captain Diamond shoved it back with a perceptible shiver.

"You know you are safe," he said.

"In other words I know wherein lies the weakness of my Samson," Abe laughed. "But, enough of this; I only dropped in for a moment to help you pass an otherwise dull hour. I'll go now, but even when invisible I will be near you. While life lasts I shall watch over you, King Diamond!"

The strange man grimaced in a fashion meant to be mirthful, and after a series of contortions, managed to get out of the room. Before closing the door he paused to look back with a gloating smile, but Diamond still sat by the table, his face covered by his hands.

He heard the door close, but it was half an hour before he stirred. Finally he lifted his head as though just arousing from sleep.

"Gone!" he muttered, busily; "gone! He is as inexorable a master as Mephistopheles, but I am unlike Faust in that I have never had any gain myself. Gain? My life has been a curse since—since—"

He arose and began pacing the room with long, nervous strides. He was thoroughly overthrown mentally, for the time, but except for the twitching of his muscles his cold face gave no sign.

"Accursed! accursed!"

He muttered the word not less than a dozen times as he strode back and forth, but he finally returned to his chair, lit another cigar and began to smoke in the old way.

Shortly after there was a knock at the door, and when he bade the applicant enter there appeared a man who looked as though he had had an encounter with a railroad train and got the worst of it. Besides a natural roughness, raggedness and eccentric disorder of hair and beard, he was now patched up with court-plaster in divers places and one arm was in a sling.

Diamond stared in amazement.

"Who the dickens are you?" he demanded.

"I'm a lost an' undone critter," was the mournful reply, as the fellow sunk into a chair. "I'm a victim, a martyr, a terrible example."

"Of insanity or rum?"

"Neither, your honor. I see yer don't know me, but I'm Jake, an' I was Ben Bolter's best friend. Poor Ben! He's gone on ahead, your honor."

Diamond had grown interested.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Ben Bolter is dead—'n a baked flea. And—"

"Come to the point, man. What has happened? Who are you? Waste no words."

"I'm Jake, an' it was at my ranch you hired ther crazy critter shut up. I was Ben's right bower. Still, ther crazy critter got away."

Diamond sat staring in a frightened way, but he managed to call for particulars and the story was told. Then he knew the madwoman had really escaped and he looked so wild with rage that Jake edged further around the table.

"I'm glad Ben Bolter is dead," he said, at last, "for he ran wholly against my orders in molesting that doctor. But this crazy woman; is there a hope she perished in the fire?"

"No; I've see'd her sence."

"Ha! Where?"

"Furder south; out on Rattlepan Plain. I went that way when my ole neighbors riz ag'in' me, an' thar I see'd suthin' kinder queer. I was lyin' in a bit o' timm-r when I chanced ter look out an' see'd ther wild critter clawin' it over ther sand in a lively way. I thought I see'd my chance an' laid my plans ter scoop her in fur you, but afore I left kiver I tuck a look around. Result, I see'd three hossmen ridin' on t'other side o' ther timber, an' when I see'd them I jest laid down flat an' never stirred until they was gone from sight. I knowed 'em."

"Who were they?"

"One was an ole Western rover they call Griff, though he's lived peaceably by ther water ther last ten year; ther second was a young chap I didn't know, while ther third was that same doctor."

"By Judas! they were after the madwoman."

"I don't know what else they could be after."

Diamond's thoughts ran quickly. He mapped out his course, forming a plan that needed two or three stout rascals. He looked at Jake. Plainly, that dilapidated wretch was not fit for service. He must be made to tell all he knew and then paid to hold his tongue. This was the work of only a short time, and then Jake went away with his pockets full of jingling coin.

"I must take to the war-path again," said Diamond with energy. "I must take the midnight train and see the sun rise on Rattlepan Plain. If Griff and the others get that madwoman it is ten to one Iron-Armed Abe stumbles upon her, and then—"

He finished the sentence with a shiver and then found pen and ink and sat down by the table.

"I must write to her before I go. I hate to leave San Francisco just now, but it will not be for a great while, and the case of Alton vs. Templeton will not take any great stride while Rube Leyden is away. Be that as it may I must trust to her shrewdness if there is any new complication, and it's pretty sure she won't give up the Templeton million tamely."

He wrote his letter hurriedly, and then aris-

ing, dressed himself in rougher clothes and prepared for work on the desert. He went well armed and fitted as a veteran knew how, and his room was soon vacant.

He took the midnight train as he had said, and though he seemed to be alone, there were two other men who never lost sight of him, and when he left the train at the end of its trip these men accompanied him.

St. Jerome did not seem wholly at ease; even his men noticed that he looked over his shoulder frequently, as though afraid some one was following him, but they had never heard of Iron-Armed Abe.

These men had agreed to find horses for the trio when the journey by rail was ended and they kept their word. Good animals were secured and the three set out without unnecessary delay.

When the sun rose they were on the Rattlepan Plain, as Diamond had planned, but neither The Wild nor Griff's party was in sight. Diamond had not expected to see them; many miles might be traversed before they were overtaken, and they settled grimly down to their work.

But as they went on the leader never failed to look over his shoulder now and then as though he expected to see a pursuer.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN THE LAKE-BED.

THE same sunrise found another party pursuing its way some miles southeast of the one last noticed. Like the first, it was composed of three persons. They were Griff, Doctor Rube, and Ned Boxfield.

The reader is already aware that Diamond's belief that they were searching for The Wild was incorrect. They did not suspect she was on Rattlepan Plain; they even thought she had perished in the ruins of Jake's house; their errand was of an altogether different nature.

As we have before said, their faces were toward the City of the Desert, and from the way in which they pushed on they bade fair to arrive there in due time if Griff proved equal to the demands of the occasion as guide.

As for Ned Boxfield, he was with the party simply because A. Beesinger, attorney-at-law, had decided that the junior did not attend to business properly. As a result, the embryo firm had been dissolved in its genesis and Boxfield was his own man.

He had thus far proved a valuable companion on the trail. His unflinching good-humor was so infectious that even Griff forgot his "doubts" and something like friendship sprang up between them.

"It's a plant I shall seek to cultivate daily," Ned observed to Doctor Rube. "Let me touch the better nature of this grizzled doubter and it'll go a long ways with Norola. I bear this always in mind; hence, observe the respect and docility with which I address Griff, Esquire."

They journeyed on through the day and approached the line between California and Arizona as rapidly as was deemed good for their horse-flesh. Mt. St. Bernardino had been left behind and they were in that portion of the first-mentioned State where so many "dry lakes" are to be found; in other words, the beds of what were once lakes, but from which, with the eccentricity of Western streams, the water had gone previous to any recorded history.

In one of these lake-beds they halted for the night. The weather was not so hot as they had reason to expect, and while it held that way Griff preferred to keep his regular hours.

They lay down to sleep at an early hour and without any fear of molestation. They were out of the track of the fierce Apache and the road-agent could have no call to be ranging about the dry-lake country.

Doctor Rube fell asleep easily. Several hours passed before he again awoke, but when he unclosed his eyes he found himself in a mood little suited for further sleep. The moon had arisen and was flooding the scene with silver light, and it was so rovel that he arose, lit his pipe and strolled away.

The lake-bed was by no means level. Instead, it had much the same appearance as the higher land except that it was treeless. Hills were numerous and from ten to fifty feet high, while every form and species of rock known to the region were there in abundance.

The doctor made his way to the top of one of the hills and sat down with his back to a rock.

The scene around him was a peculiarly interesting one. The moonlight touched the hills and rocks whitely on one side and threw the other into black shadow, and with this checker-board-like view extending far away the doctor sat and looked and smoked with interest.

He was still there when he saw something move in this waste of desolation. He looked more earnestly and the object assumed shape; though some distance away he believed he was safe in pronouncing it a horseman.

For perhaps a half-minute it was visible and then it disappeared behind a hill. He waited in vain for it to reappear.

Again he looked and a second object became visible, precisely like the first, following just

the same course, and ultimately disappearing behind the same hill.

Nor was this all; a third and a fourth followed, but none of them emerged from behind the hill.

Then the procession ended, but Doctor Rube had grown interested and was filled with a desire to know who and what they were. He started to arouse Griff, but, thinking better of it, resolved to investigate alone.

So he put away his pipe, looked to his weapons, descended his hill and made his way toward the one behind which the unknown horsemen had gone.

No more than ordinary prudence was needed, for great boulders that had once lined the bottom of the lake were all along the way, and he saw no one during the journey.

He reached the southern side of the hill and paused to listen. All was silent; there was nothing to show that the strangers were near, but he felt sure they had not left the opposite side.

He was beginning to wish he had brought Griff, but he would not return. He began the ascent of the hill, and pausing often to listen, ultimately gained the top. Once there, he peered over with extreme caution.

The horsemen were visible, and not only the few he had seen, but a round dozen more. All were lying at their ease, and with the exception of two or three, all seemed asleep. A short distance away their horses stood in a group.

At first it seemed no more than a sleeping camp, and of little interest, but Doctor Rube noticed a peculiarity, and others followed in rapid succession.

The campers were strangely alike in every particular. Each one was clad in black, and the fashion of their garments was the same, even to the drooping helmet hats. All the horses, too, were jet-black of color, and against a rock leaned fifteen spears with black wooden handles and glittering steel blades.

Doctor Rube could not see all this without remembering a time when he had seen similarly clad men in another place, and his lips framed three words:

"The Black Riders!"

Ay! Unless appearances were deceptive, a detachment of Captain Diamond's horse soldiers were before him. What they were doing so far from the City of the Desert was not clear, but Doctor Rube cared little so long as they were there. It flashed upon him that by following their trail he could go to the secret city, and he only delayed for a more critical survey before returning to Griff.

He was still looking when a hand was laid on his shoulder, but, so light was the touch, he scarcely started, believing it to have been from the hand of Griff or Ned; but when he looked around he saw an unexpected sight.

Iron-Armed Abe stood beside him!

It will be remembered that Rube had not seen him since the night in the City of the Desert when they were jointly endeavoring to save the girl from Diamond's clutches. The Destroyer had made a deep impression on his mind then, and he had often wondered what had become of him, but that they would meet thus he had never expected.

"Well?" questioned the Hercules, calmly.

"Speak softly," said the doctor; "the Black Riders are just below."

"What of it?"

"Isn't it well to keep them ignorant of our presence?"

"Perhaps so."

"Come with me, Iron-Armed Abe; I want to speak with you."

"Speak here. There is little danger of our being overheard, and if we are it is of no consequence."

"You are the man I wish to see of all men. I judge that you have not forgotten me?"

"We were jointly engaged in folly," was the curt reply. "The time was a year ago; the scene, King Diamond's city. We set ourselves up for knights of chivalry, or some such nonsense, and tried to play the gallant to a woman."

"True, true. Abe, I have never known the end of that fight. I was struck down and put out of fighting trim. What was the end—what became of the girl?"

The hunchback made a gesture of derision.

"So your thoughts still run on her. You were very much interested at the time, I remember; tried to make me believe she was a persecuted angel or something of the kind. Bah! she was a woman!"

Doctor Rube mutely agreed that his own experience had prepared him for this opinion.

"But what became of her?"

"I don't know. When the Black Riders came upon us it was so clearly a waste of time to fight that I ran away. Perhaps this wasn't heroic, but I would not waste any blood for that female and I thought you a fool for your infatuation."

The doctor winced.

"You knew her then?"

"No, I had never seen her, but it was clear to me that she was a fraud. You thought you

were taking her from a great danger, but she did not want to escape. I could see it plainly. She pretended to be afraid of me because I was deformed. She was nothing of the kind; with you as her chief protector she would have followed a skeleton if he promised to take you away from King Diamond. The girl was playing a game that night, and what is more, the alarm she gave Diamond was intentionally given. That is why I didn't care to help her away, and why I deserted when the Black Riders struck. If it hadn't been for that I should not have dallied by the way; I would risk limb and life to aid one whom King Diamond wished to destroy. The girl was in league with him!"

This was a view of the matter which Doctor Rube had never taken. He had looked upon the affair at the secret city as one where Leora Templeton had been honest and persecuted, and had believed that she had afterward been overpersuaded and had entered into Diamond's plans.

Now that Iron-Armed Abe advanced the idea he was not reluctant to believe; but the question arose, what had been the object? Time and again since that singular period in his life Rube had wondered why Diamond had brought him all the way from Snicker's Gulch to the City of the Desert to perform the amputation and had then abandoned the game so tamely and sent him back.

"Abe," he resumed, after a pause, "where is that girl now?"

The hunchback chuckled.

"You ought to know," he replied. "I've seen you going into her house not many days ago. They call her Leora Templeton now."

"Isn't that her real name?"

"You know it isn't. You know the real Leora died over a year ago in the railroad accident. You know this but are reluctant to believe. Why, it's all clear enough. It was at first proposed to sever one of the girl's hands, so that she could look exactly like the genuine Leora—for all San Francisco had heard how her hand had been lost—but there was some obstacle or other in the plan and they finally omitted that and played their cards for a million dollars on a bolder basis. They won."

The statement removed Doctor Rube's last doubt—if, indeed, he had before been able to doubt the evidence of his own eyes—and he saw Leora Templeton, so called, in all her mental deformity, which was as hideous as her outward appearance was beautiful.

The last feather was added which was necessary to send him to the secret city full of revengeful thoughts.

"Can you lead me to Diamond's city?" he abruptly asked, after a pause.

"I am no man's guide, but you have the Black Riders under your own eyes. They are headed that way; watch them and you may see the secret city."

The Hercules had been looking over the crest of the hill, which was almost a cliff on the northern side, and he suddenly erected his head.

"Look!" he said. "The stout man with his head on his arm is Redspur, chief of the Black Riders. He is Diamond's best man, for Camp is a coward. But Redspur is brave as a rock. Given a command he obeys without question; he is always ready to fight and murder, though far from being unnecessarily cruel by nature."

The speaker raised a small stone and poised it in his hand.

"What are you going to do?" Doctor Rube nervously asked.

"Give valiant Redspur a start."

The Destroyer put aside the hand with which his companion would have prevented the act and dropped the stone. Doctor Rube watched its course with suspended breath. It struck the sleeping man squarely upon the shoulder, making a dull thud and then bounding to one side.

It brought Redspur up like a jumping-jack and he arose with his weapons in his hands. Standing there he glared around like the grim desperado he was, and it would have fared hard with an enemy whom he had at his mercy.

But a mocking laugh sounded from the top of the hill.

"Look this way, Redspur!" cried the Hercules.

"Look, with all your eyes!"

The chief obeyed and, standing on the crest, he saw his old enemy. The sight was not surprising, for he knew enough of Iron-Armed Abe to feel no emotion if he saw him at the North Pole.

It did occur to him, however, that it was a good chance to seize the man who had destroyed so many of his Riders and his loud voice aroused the whole camp.

Not long did it take those experienced warriors to get in motion, but when they surrounded the hill there was no sign of their old enemy. He had come as mysteriously as he always did and gone as silently. Redspur would have given his office for Iron-Armed Abe's head, but he was more likely to some time give his own head and get nothing in return.

But Doctor Rube, who had precipitately retreated to camp and aroused his companions, was in better spirits. He had lost sight of the hunchback in the retreat and had no thought

of looking further for him, but they were near the Back Riders and the use of such prudence as Griff understood would enable them to go on to the City of the Desert.

At least, such was his opinion, just then.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE CITY OF THE DESERT.

"HERE we are, gentlemen; look for yourselves!"

The speaker was Doctor Rube, and he addressed Ned Boxfield and Griff. The three men stood on a high hill, which might well be called a mountain, of crescent shape. Within the space thereby inclosed was a valley, and in the valley was the City of the Desert.

Yes, they had passed over all the intervening miles; and there at last, at daybreak, they stood and looked down on the secret city.

The place seemed asleep, and the whole valley was silent and gray. Even the eastern mountain was as yet untouched by the sun's rays.

"It's ther same place," said Griff, "but it hez changed amazin'. Not a house stood hyar when I was on ther scene last, and I confess I've had my doubts ever sence we started of ther house warn't a *Injin-fatuus* o' your brain. But et is hyar!"

"And to think that I spent six months with other guides trying to find it! If I had known of you, all that trouble might have been saved."

Ned and Griff took up the conversation, while Doctor Rube fell into thought deep and none too pleasant as he looked down at Golden Valley. There he first met her who was known as Leora Templeton. There was hatched the plot to secure a million dollars. There he had been ordered to mutilate the girl's hand and had almost—he would not admit anything further—fallen in love with her instead.

At one time he had given up the hope of ever seeing the place again, but Griff had brought him safely through. We say Griff, because the trail of the Black Riders, encountered at the dry lake, had been lost soon after it was "lifted." What had become of them or of Iron-Armed Abe, Rube did not know, but once more he looked on the mystic city.

Others saw it too, and when the case of Alton vs. Templeton was tried, he would not be alone in his statement that the place was a thing of fact.

"Ther next thing," said Griff, breaking in on his meditation, "is ter gobble a few o' tler Black Riders."

"Which is easier said than done. The nonchalance with which J. Q. A. Smith sat in his office and suggested that we bring home two or three of them for State's evidence was refreshing. One would think they were fish, to be had by the baiting of a book."

"If your hunchback was here we might hire him to bag a few of 'em," suggested Boxfield.

"Have no fears, gentlemen; if you want the Black Riders they are here!"

It was a new voice which made the announcement, and the trio wheeled like one man. They were startled, and they had reason to be. Before them stood Redspur, and behind were half a score of his ebony-bued followers.

It dawned upon Doctor Rube that they were in a trap, and his hand dropped on his revolver. Before he had time to use it, Griff arose in the air like an acrobat, shot over the head of a man who was in his line of advance, and vanished like a ghost among the rocks. A neater piece of work had never been done at the City of the Desert, and it was almost miraculous when Griff's gray hairs were considered.

Redspur, however, was not the man to let a second prisoner escape in such a way, and at a wave of his hand the Black Riders—all were on foot, in this case—buried themselves on Rube and Ned.

There was a confused struggle for several moments and then a knot of human beings slowly untied and the two adventurers were visible with their hands tied behind them.

Redspur looked at them with a grim smile. He was a brawny fellow who might have made a model for a Roman gladiator, and as a black beard persisted in coloring his chin and cheeks despite frequent shaving he had a particularly solid and grim appearance in general.

"So you want to bag two or three of the Black Riders, do you, boys?" he asked.

"I believe we mentioned the fact," Rube coolly replied.

"Suppose you take me."

"Nothing would suit me better."

"You are no chicken, I see. But why are you here?"

Doctor Rube hesitated.

"I'm afraid we can't give any real reason. There is a legend that there is a secret city somewhere in Arizona, so we looked for it."

"That story will do for now," Redspur evenly observed, "but you must understand that the rulers of yonder city will not believe it. Come with me!"

"What sort of a wickedest city in Arizona is this that can't be looked in the face?" Boxfield

asked. "Strikes me your style is rather bold and forward."

"Boys frequently have singular opinions," Redspur observed, with a coolness which made Ned storm in a harmless way.

The prisoners were marched into the village. The place had not yet fully aroused from the rest of night, but some of the people were astir and Rube saw that their glances were anything but friendly.

Redspur conducted his captives to one of the stone buildings mentioned in the beginning of this story and confined them in a cell not unlike those of more civilized regions. There they were left to discuss their situation together for an hour or more when Redspur returned accompanied by a person the doctor was not slow to recognize.

It was Camp, the man who had brought him from Snicker's Gulch to the secret city, a year before.

The latter adjusted his spectacles for a good look and then seemed astonished.

"Bless me!" he observed.

"You need it," Redspur was heard to mutter, in a subdued voice.

Doctor Rube eyed Camp steadily.

"Young man," the latter finally said, "is this a case of accidental resemblance, or have I seen you before?"

"There's no accident in the case. I am the man you took in at Snicker's Gulch, near Alligator Ridge, and brought across the desert."

"And you've come back again!"

Camp seemed to be filled with dismay.

"As you see."

"Why did you do it? Don't you know it is fatal to see the City of the Desert—that we form a world by ourselves to which the outsider may never come? Didn't you see enough of this place before?"

Camp spoke peevishly, scoldingly, and Doctor Rube believed he knew the cause.

"I am here to look into your affairs fully," he said.

"Captain Diamond will order you killed."

"Captain Diamond is in San Francisco."

Again the subordinate looked startled; to all appearances, he knew little of his superior's movements. He did not answer, and Doctor Rube continued:

"Mr. Redspur, here, has gobbled us up like a pair of turkeys. I trust you will not stand by him in any such work as that."

"Why did you come here?" Camp irritably asked. "Why didn't you keep where you belonged?"

"I believe all United States soil is open to her sons."

"Wrong, young man, wrong. Golden Valley is an exception. None but the followers of Diamond are allowed here, or, if they come, they never go away."

Redspur chuckled humorously.

"These chickens came to the top of the Horseshoe and stood looking down as serenely as though not an enemy existed in Arizona. Know ye, my chickens, that the City of the Desert cannot be approached at any hour on the sly. Every rock is covered by a sentinel, and you had no sooner come in sight than the fact was made known. We took you in at our leisure."

"One man you did not find easy to take in."

"We'll have him soon," Redspur answered, with careless confidence.

Camp did not seem ready to decide what should be done with the prisoners and went away without many more words. Doctor Rube suspected that while he was ignorant of the exact plans of Diamond, he knew enough to be uncertain what Diamond would desire in the case—to hesitate about killing the doctor like a common intruder.

The day wore slowly on with the prisoners. Food was passed in through a hole in the wall, but neither Redspur nor Camp reappeared for some time.

What would be the end of their adventure was uncertain. Rube, who had seen Diamond in his tiger-like moods, was inclined to think it would be death; but Ned Boxfield was as gay and calm as though still in Mr. Beesinger's office. To Camp he had taken a strong dislike and, referring to Diamond now as Beelzebub, he invariably called Camp his "Best Man."

His pleasant fancies helped Doctor Rube through the day, but the latter would occasionally lose his words and wonder what would be the end. Probably Camp would send to San Francisco for orders from Diamond, and then that man would not miss the chance to remove the principal witness in Alton vs. Templeton.

It was near night when Redspur entered the cell with two men at his back.

"I am about to give you a look at the outer world," he said to Doctor Rube, "which, if duly improved, will show you something of interest."

As he spoke, the covering of the barred window slipped aside, and the chief of the Black Riders, mounting on a stool, looked out in silence for a full minute. Then he motioned to Rube to take his place.

The latter obeyed.

The street lay revealed to him, but for the moment it seemed empty. The beat of horses'

hoofs directed his attention to one side. Two riders were approaching, one a man, the other a woman.

Doctor Rube saw, and stood dumfounded. They were Captain Diamond and Leora Templeton!

Ay, it was no delusion—no confusion of identity. Doctor Rube would have sworn to the fact. There could not be another man so like Diamond, and he knew the woman was Leora Templeton. She even wore the same garments he had once before seen in San Francisco, while the horse was the one secured by her after the adventure with Ben Bolter's gang.

The doctor felt another person beside him and heard Ned Boxfield's surprised exclamation; but he did not turn his head—he had eyes for no one except the riders.

They were going slowly past, talking rapidly, and though their words were undistinguishable, it was clear they were in the best of spirits.

Doctor Rube was not surprised to see them together, but he was surprised to see them at the City of the Desert.

At the same time he was not slow to draw the inference that his own journey to the desert had been discovered by Diamond, and measures taken to prevent his return.

The riders receded, the window was abruptly closed in their faces, and they turned to find themselves the only occupants of the cell. Redspur and his men had silently withdrawn.

"Well," said Boxfield, "that removes the last doubt. We can no longer question Miss Templeton's guilt. She is the ally of Diamond, and they have stolen the million of Jacob Templeton, miser."

"There is no question as to identity?"

"I'll stake my life on it!"

And Doctor Rube was willing to say as much. He felt a thrill of deep regret that one so fair should be so evil; but his jealousy of Diamond swept away weaker sentiments.

"Ned, my boy," he said, "we are doomed to die in this mysterious city. I know too much of these precious plotters for their good. They won't let me tell it in San Francisco."

Boxfield was not prepared to pronounce this idea an absurd one. When men scheme for a million dollars, and value human lives which are in their way as mere trifles, they are not likely to be merciful.

As for escape, even Boxfield did not speak of that.

The stones forming the walls of their cell were firmly cemented, and they did not possess as much as a pen-knife to remove them.

They were literally at the mercy of a man little given to mercy—King Diamond.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE BLACK PIT.

It will be remembered that Griff escaped from Redspur's clutches with an agility which surprised every one except himself. He was not surprised, for he knew what he had been in his younger days, and that the old blood was not wholly inferior to the young.

Once clear of the circle of Black Riders, he found no trouble in keeping out of the way among the rocks, and from a secret place he saw Doctor Rube and Boxfield led to the village.

Then he shook his head gloomily.

"I hev my doubts ef they ever git out alive," he said. "I don't know this hyar Cap'n Diamond, but ther doctor ain't a man ter exaggerate, an' he sez he's a bad 'un. I'm afeerd ther boyees is goners."

Something like a chuckle caused the old man to wheel. He was no longer alone. A man sat on a stone four feet away, coolly regarding him, but when Griff laid his hand on his knife the man did not stir.

Griff went no further with hostilities however, for he suddenly noticed that this man was hump-backed, and he remembered Rube's account of Iron-Armed Abe.

"You don't hide well," said the hunchback, as Griff remained silent.

"You found me out, though I hev my doubts ef ev'ry one could hev did it."

"Nonsense! You will be scooped up by the Black Riders inside of an hour as your friends have been."

"I want you ter help me out," Griff sturdily said.

"M—"

"Yes."

"Why should I?"

"Because you hate Diamond an' his Black Riders an' et salary. You are Iron-Armed Abe an' a man o' gumption. I want you ter jine hands with me."

The hunchback, who was indeed Abe, hesitated for a moment, but he may have been favorably impressed by the grim old face of Griff.

"Do you know where I live?" he finally asked.

"Ther Black Riders told Rube you lived up thar, but I hev my doubts."

Griff pointed to the volcanic mountain. It had not changed to any extent since Rube saw

it a year before, but it somehow looked like a wrathful monster frowning down on the valley and threatening ultimate destruction.

"Yes, I live there," the Hercules answered. "Smoky Mountain is my home and has been ever since King Diamond built his city. Yonder people call the mountain crater the Black Pit, and say that by it I descend to regions of eternal fire and back again. They call me a demon, a fiend, and other pet names, but I am the only man who was ever in the Black Pit. Dare you go there with me?"

"Ef it's an asylum fur you it'll be ther same fur me, ef you'll allow it," Griff answered. "I don't believe in a step-ladder betwixt ther two worlds, an' as you seem ter hev kept in good bodily health on Black Pit, I prefer it to hangin' round here fur them black imps ter gobble."

The hunchback's face expressed something akin to satisfaction.

"You shall go with me, though I thought I should never conduct any one into my volcano home. But, never mind; the time is near at hand when no one shall live there; the time is near at hand when the demon of the Smoky Mountain shall arise in his wrath and streams of lava shall flow down Golden Valley and bury the city of King Diamond forever from sight."

The Destroyer had grown somewhat wild and dramatic at the end of his speech, but his mood suddenly changed, and he tersely added:

"Follow me; to remain here is to invite capture."

Griff unhesitatingly followed. Doctor Rube had told him how Abe hated Diamond, and in the face of the man he saw honesty and sincerity in the present case, if nothing more.

Abe led the way across the Horseshoe toward Smoky Mountain. The place was by no means one to inspire awe at a distance, for the smoke was thin and arose lazily; but when they stood at the edge of the crater Griff looked with less indifference.

The Pit was about a fourth of a mile in diameter at its widest point, but its boundary line was exceedingly ragged and irregular, the sides approaching in some places so that a stone might have been hurled across with ease.

The smoke rose only from the very center, where the cavity looked bold, rugged and awe-inspiring, and though the rocks under their feet were less than blood-warm the air from the smoking region was hot and unwholesome.

"You don't live in there," said Griff, suddenly, turning on his companion.

"Why not?" the Hercules asked, smiling.

"If I am a fiend from the regions of the lost, as Diamond's men say, a little volcanic fire and brimstone won't harm me. However, don't judge the whole crater by this one point which sends up heat and smoke. That is where the mountain demon sends out his fiery breath. Come with me!"

The speaker led the way around the side of the crater, pausing now and then to let Griff look down; a poor satisfaction since he only had a view of dark, volcanic rocks which ended in utter darkness where the light failed to penetrate to the seemingly bottomless pit.

They finally paused where an arm of the crater shot off at one side and a gradual descent led around in a half-circle to an unseen point.

Down this the hunchback went and Griff closely followed. The latter "had his doubts" about the wisdom of what he was doing, but he made no useless talk.

Very soon they arrived at a point where their path ended abruptly and a deep chasm yawned beyond, but Iron-Armed Abe led on where no one else would think of going and they finally struck a more substantial feeling floor, though they were in utter darkness.

"Here is my reception-room," said the strange man, chuckling. "Let me get a light and show you."

He did as he said and Griff looked around in wonder. He was in a vast, vaulted chamber of dark, somber rock. Its exact forward size was uncertain, but it had a gloomy grandeur which impressed even his practical nature.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the Destroyer, "who says Black Pit is a mean place of residence? Even King Diamond lacks such a magnificent hall as this. It is an abode fit for Alexanders and Hannibals."

Griff had never heard of these worthies, but he said he "bad no doubt but 'twas."

Abe swung his light, which was a pine-knot, until a flourishing blaze was produced, and then bade Griff follow once more. They went on through chambers like the first, all grand, spacious, and comfortable, but so gloomy that Griff could not add his voice in admiration without his usual amendment:

"It may be a place ekal ter a Mexican hacienda, but I has my doubts."

When Abe had satisfied himself by wandering, he conducted his companion to his living-room, explaining that it was just near enough to the half-active fire of the main crater to be comfortable.

Griff had his own ideas of comfort, which did not include living inside of a volcano which might at any time arouse in its fury and consume him; but he had a bravery as grim as his general grim nature, and he let the matter

pass, and asked what could be done for Doctor Rube and Ned.

He half-expected Iron-Armed Abe to show indifference; but it was one of the Destroyer's chief pleasures to thwart Diamond. He at once became thoughtful.

"I can get them out of the village if their captors trust solely to bolts and bars," he answered. "I never stop for such trifles. But Diamond may set a guard over them, in which case all would not work so well. I am, however, at your service, and if King Diamond holds them, it would be because he has foreseen the interference of Iron-Armed Abe."

He smiled somberly.

"I take it you hate him a good bit," said Griff.

"Hate? The word is weak. Nothing I can do will ever pay the debt, yet I know he is living in torture day by day. He knows that he must die by my hand sooner or later, and every hour is a nightmare. He has it in his heart to kill me, but he would not shed my blood for any money. Yet, he and his are doomed. Some day the demon of Smoky Mountain will arouse in his might, and send out fire and destruction. The village below will be buried, and Golden Valley will be one level, barren plain of lava."

"What of this should happen now, an' turn us inter pillars an' bed-ticks o' salt, ez happened ter Lot's wife?"

"The demon will tell me when he is ready."

"Do yer talk with ther critter?"

"Ay. Often I stand over the crater with smoke and gases circling around me, and talk with the demon."

The hunchback spoke calmly; but Griff saw that he was not wholly in his right mind.

"I have sometimes wondered," continued the Destroyer, what would be the fate of a man if tossed into the main crater. How he would go down, down, down! And the demon would shout, and laugh, and send forth a cloud of ashes. It would be rare sport, Griff!"

Griff corroborated the assertion, but he did not speak with any great enthusiasm. If the hunchback had such a dangerous idea in his mind, there was no knowing how soon he would see fit to put it in execution, and if it was tried, his own proximity would throw him into prominence as a good example for practice. The veteran was bold and strong, but as he observed Abe's great arms he knew he had not been called the "Iron-Armed" without reason.

But the day passed without a hostile manifestation. They did not go any further from their quarters than to ascend to the top of the crater and look down on the village. They saw nothing there that was unusual. In the mountain, however, the Black Riders were visible. They were searching for Griff, but they searched in vain.

Plans were laid for active service, and two hours after dark Griff and his ally left the Black Pit. The former had no clear idea of how the rescue was to be accomplished, but Abe expressed utter confidence in his ability, and the veteran went with the tide.

If the worst came he was an old Forty-niner, and knew how to fight, or, if need be, how to die.

They descended Smoky Mountain leisurely, and advanced toward the town. Half-way the hunchback left his ally, and went on alone to "feel the pulse," as he expressed it, of the men who followed King Diamond's lead.

He returned at the end of an hour.

"Come!" he said. "The City of the Desert is enjoying a delusive slumber, and our time is at hand. Let us strike!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

A SURPRISE FOR GRIFF.

THE veteran did not need a second invitation. He arose and took a forward step, but Iron-Armed Abe leaned on his rifle and remained like a statue.

"I hope we shall succeed without being discovered," he said, slowly, "for if there is trouble I do not know what I may do. The thirst for blood is strong within me to-night. A voice seems calling to me to slay, slay, slay! When this is so I become unsteady and liable to forget. I may kill indiscriminately. Man, if you see my hand at his throat, stay it if you will. Stay it, for his time is not yet come."

"Do you mean that thar Diamond?"

"The same."

"Wall, I'll do my best, old man; but I hev my doubts ef it would do any good ef you got right up an' bowled in 'arnest. But let's go on an' try our luck."

"Come, then, and I will try to still the voice."

He assumed his old air, except that he was more somber, and they went on. Griff, however, shook his head as they walked, and tapped his forehead significantly for his own amusement.

"Mad!" he muttered; "mad as a March hare; an' it's wonderfully quar how much like Ther Wild he is. Ef they was off'm one stick they wouldn't be more like. I take it this critter is dang'rous in his spasm, though, whar'as Ther Wild was always ez gentle ez a mouse."

They crossed Golden Creek, and stood at the edge of the village. The whole place seemed sleeping; not a light was visible.

Iron-Armed Abe soon made good his declaration that he knew every part of the place. He moved forward steadily, silently, safely, always seeming to know where lay the best path and where existed the least danger from the enemy.

Once in the center of the place, Griff expected him to proceed to the building he had pointed out as the prison, but he did nothing of the kind. Explaining that a strong force of Black Riders would undoubtedly be on guard there, he bade his companion follow unhesitatingly.

Griff obeyed, though his composure wavered a little when they reached a building Abe announced as the home of Diamond. It was the same in which Doctor Rube had once been ordered to perform an amputation.

It looked strong enough to resist anything weaker than a battering-ram, but the Destroyer went down on his knees by a grated basement window and removed the grating easily.

"They think it fast," he said to Griff with a calm smile.

And then they entered.

Griff knew they were in the lair of the lion, and prepared himself for the worst. What would come no man could say. He was trusting all to the hunchback, on whose part one false move would ruin all. Yet, it would fare ill with the man who first molested the veteran.

Abe led on, and they ascended a stairway; he went further and they entered a furnished room which was dark and silent.

"Be very careful," said the leader. "One incautious sound here would ruin all. I am about to show you the prince of all villains—if he is in his room—and you must govern yourself. Not but that I can go to his bedside and defy him, but discovery would ruin your friends. Remember now to keep calm; you will see a lighted room and King Diamond!"

He pushed aside what appeared to be a piece of the solid wall and the lighted room was revealed. In one corner stood a bed and on the bed they saw a man.

Captain Diamond was again at home.

Iron-Armed Abe smiled in a wolfish way and pointed with his long finger. Intense hatred was expressed in every feature.

His enemy was sleeping soundly, and, lying on his right side, faced them. One hand was beneath his head; the other lay outside the white spread. His face had never looked paler; the drooping of the long lashes added to the effect.

But, far more noticeable than aught else, his great diamond blazed at his breast. He lay so that the lamp's rays fell full upon it, and little, sharp gleams seemed to shoot out. Even when King Diamond slept, the serpent's eye was active.

It was a strong picture; too strong for Griff, who was fearful it would end by the opening of Diamond's eyes. He turned to Iron-Armed Abe. The latter's hands were working nervously, as though he longed to seize that white throat and cut short his span of life.

Perhaps he feared to trust himself. He drew back, closed the panel and pulled his companion along. They left the room, descended the stairs and stood once more in the basement.

"What a picture was that!" the Destroyer said. "So must Satan look as he sleeps. Uneasy lies King Diamond's head, however; 'tis from womanish fear he leaves his light burning. He would have a guard always there, except that he knows his rough fellows would no longer obey him if they knew his weakness. Yet, he is a lion in battle; he fears no one except me."

There was a ring in the Destroyer's voice which told of somber pleasure, but not of pride. He exulted in being able to punish his enemy, but not because his enemy was feared by other men.

"Ain't he likely ter awake an' ketch us?" asked Griff.

"You don't approve of my delay. Well, perhaps you are right; let us go on."

They went and Abe passed through a heavy wooden door and then along a passage. If Griff had ever read a romance of the Middle Ages he would have been reminded of the castles and secret ways of that period, but he was unlearned and practical.

At the end of fifty yards the hunchback paused before another door.

"We are about to emerge into the basement of the building where your friends are confined. If we find any of Diamond's tools there they must be silenced."

"Just ez you say."

Griff did not speak cheerfully, for his "doubts" were strong, but he knew it was no time for hesitation.

The Destroyer opened the door. A dark passage lay beyond, but after a cautious delay he introduced the light of their lamp in front and they went on. The passage ended at another door; Abe slowly opened it and a lighted room was revealed beyond. It was not empty. Two men sat at a table, and were evidently guards on duty, or, more correctly, guards neglecting their duty, for both were asleep.

The hunchback made several motions by which Griff understood he was to stand over them with ready revolvers while his companion sought for Rube and Ned; and he had no sooner assumed the position than Abe disappeared through another door.

Griff was far from being at ease. It is true he would have the advantage of striking first if the men awoke, and the helmet hats beside them proved that they were of the Black Riders; but he did not know what would be the result of a fight, or whether Iron-Armed Abe would stand by him.

Several minutes passed and the men still slept peacefully. The silence around was so marked that their breathing sounded unnaturally loud; Griff had never felt more ill at ease.

At last footsteps were heard and the hunchback reappeared. Doctor Rube and Ned Boxfield were at his heels.

The meeting was a pleasant one, but Abe did not pause for an elaborate greeting. He motioned to Griff to leave his post and the trio followed him along the back track.

Hand-shaking was indulged in by all except the leader when the door was closed on the sleeping guards. Abe was in no mood for delay and he turned an apparently deaf ear on the thanks of all.

"We've got to return by way of Diamond's house," he said, "and the sooner we do it the better."

He led on, but Griff improved the opportunity to suggest to his younger friends that they leave the City of the Desert that night and forever. He had already learned that the valley kingdom was not to be despised, and he was also certain that Diamond would make sure next time he had them in his power.

Doctor Rube, however, stopped Abe.

"You remember," he said, "the girl of whom we have before spoken? I have discovered that she is even now in this town. Is it possible to capture and convey her to San Francisco?"

The hunchback frowned.

"This girl will be your ruin," he harshly said.

"On the contrary, I intend to be hers," said Rube, remembering how she had smiled on Diamond in the street. "She is playing a bold, audacious game, but I wish to put her in prison to reflect on it."

"What do you care?" Abe asked.

"Nothing, except that she has stolen the inheritance of a poor and worthy girl. I would see the wrong righted."

Abe smiled coldly.

"You mean well, but you are trying to deceive even yourself. You want to drag Leora Templeton to the dust because you are jealous of Diamond, alias St. Jerome. If it were not for that, you would be less zealous. Stop, my good sir; do not be hasty. What one of us is more than human? If Leora loved you, would you wrest her million away? Enough! let us refrain from argument. You say you want to take the girl captive. I will do the best I can, not because I want to oblige you, but because I hate Diamond and am anxious to do all I can to trouble him."

This speech was so devoid of nonsense that no one felt like advancing their private views after it, and Doctor Rube spoke very meekly as he said he would be grateful if the Destroyer would aid him as before said.

None of them knew where Leora was to be found, but Abe said that if she had come to the city as Diamond's guest she would probably be in his house, and they would proceed to look at once.

Re-entering the main building they went on among numerous halls in which Abe seemed perfectly at home. And yet, as much as Diamond knew of his power, he had never suspected that this place was open to him.

Had he done so he would not have relied on the midnight lamp to preserve him from harm.

The hunchback finally paused before a closed door.

"If the adventuress is in the house I suspect she is within this room," he said. "We will enter and see."

He laid his hand on the knob, but it did not yield. Then he drew a curious steel instrument from his pocket and introduced it in the lock.

Every one expected him to open a clear road for them, but, instead, he suddenly wheeled and extinguished the light. One moment they were in doubt as to his reason, but in another instant a loud shout startled his companions.

They were discovered, and his keen ears had detected the fact before their eyes.

"Keep close to me and lose no time!" he hissed, in Rube's ears. "We must abandon the game for to night; we have enough to do to care for ourselves."

He was hurrying away before the last words had been spoken, and the others readily followed. They heard sounds which showed that the whole household was arousing, and they needed no urging to get away from so dangerous a locality.

They had almost reached the place through which Griff and Abe had entered when a man arose in their path, a light in one hand and a sort of saber in the other. One instant he

seemed an enemy to be feared; the next, Abe was upon him like a tiger, his long fingers grasping at his throat.

They went down together; there was a brief struggle, and then the Destroyer arose. The unknown lay motionless, his glassy eyes staring at the ceiling.

"He will do no further harm; come on!" said Iron-Armed Abe in a somber voice.

They emerged into the outer air and hastened along the street. All instinctively looked back. Lights were visible at most of the windows, and human heads were seen at some of them.

Suddenly Griff uttered a hoarse cry and turned back. Doctor Rube was dismayed, but the hunchback caught the elder man in his arms and ran lightly.

"Let me go!" cried Griff, wildly. "I saw her at the window; I tell you I saw her. Norola! Norola!"

But whoever he had seen he was not permitted to see further; Doctor Rube and Ned added their efforts and he was hurried away from the beehive of their enemies.

CHAPTER XXX.

A STRANGE ENCOUNTER.

It was no easy task to control Griff in his present mood. He declared that he had seen Norola at one of the upper windows, and was wild to return and rescue her, but he was sensible enough to proceed to no desperate measures and they hurried him along.

Even he saw that the red lights run up the flag-poles, as they had been once before in Doctor Rube's recollection, meant danger for them all, and he yielded to the argument that it was wholly improbable that Norola should be in the City of the Desert.

Without the waste of many words it was understood that all should go for the time to the Black Pit, and Rube, who had been annoyed at the delay in leaving the village when he was first there, was surprised at the quickness with which Iron-Armed Abe took them out of it on the present occasion.

Golden Creek was crossed, the base of the mountain reached, and the ascent begun without adventure.

"Fools!" said the hunchback, looking behind them. "They are searching everywhere, and it seems they have hopes of finding those for whom they seek. Ha! ha! they little know that Iron-Armed Abe is here. They might as well try to find a will-o'-the-wisp as him!"

"I'd druther die than run," said Griff, gloomily. "I tell ye I see'd my leetle gal thar. Don't tell me I didn't; is thar another face in ther world like Norola's? I tell ye I see'd her!"

"If I thought so I'd be one to go back," said Boxfield, uneasily.

"Thar ain't no doubt; I'd swar I see'd her!" Griff persisted. "She looked outer a wuder an' her face was skeered an' feary. She's ben brought hyar by that imp o' sin, who's got his evil eye on her now, but I'll hev his life ef I swim a sea o' blood ter git it. Ther man dies who hurts my Norola!"

The Destroyer laid his hand on the father's arm with the gentleness of a child.

"Right," he said, "right, my veteran. King Diamond shall pay for all his evil deeds; I know him of old. But, be not too hasty. The whole city is astir and we could do her no good to go back. Trust in me, for I swear she shall be rescued if she is indeed in King Diamond's power."

His manner calmed the old man, who submitted with unexpected docility; and the ascent of the mountain was resumed.

Not much further had they gone, however, when a figure arose in their path. All grasped their weapons, prepared for active work, but a woman's laugh and a woman's words fell upon their ears.

"Ha! ha! where go ye, gentle folks?" demanded a voice in an unnatural key. "Do you flee from the fire-flies below? See how they gleam; every house-top has one! But why do ye flee. Come, let us go and catch a fire-fly."

It was clear she referred to the red signal-lights visible from the flag-poles, but Griff sprang forward and seized her hand, at the same time uttering a cry:

"Ther Wild! Ther Wild!" he exclaimed.

The exclamation was enough to recall the mad-woman to Doctor Rube's mind and he knew she stood before them. It was a great surprise, partly because he believed she had perished in the burning house, but principally because of the scores of miles which lay between Jake's former home and Golden Valley.

Yet, there she was, beyond a doubt, and laughing merrily in Griff's hold.

"I've seen you before," she said. "There's something familiar about your face, but I can't tell what. At any rate, I'm glad to see you. Who are all these bonny gentlemen?"

Doctor Rube advanced and spoke reassuringly, but all of Ned Boxfield's attention was drawn to Iron-Armed Abe. The strange man was passing his hand over his head as though to clear away a mental mist, and with the deepest attention he stared at the deranged woman. He hung on every word she uttered as though it were a drop of life, and just as Griff suggested

that The Wild be taken to Black Pit he pressed to the front and took her arm in his broad hand.

"Woman, who are you?"

He asked the question in a voice which trembled, yet, withal, in a voice of unexpected gentleness.

"Who am I?" she returned. "How do I know? I've lost myself. Once I had a name, but that was before Lucifer met me. He ground my soul under his heel, and since then—since then—I don't know who I am!"

She put her hands to her face in a bewildered way, but Iron-Armed Abe, breathing heavily, took them away and pushed the tangled hair back from her forehead. His eyes must have defied even the darkness, for he uttered a cry which was like that of a tigress wounded in defense of her young.

"It is she!" he cried; "it is little Nora! Merciful heaven, it is little Nora!"

And then he caught her in his long arms and held her to his mis-shapen form, all the while crying out in a strange way which was so little like that of a human being that it was hard to classify it; but The Wild, while submitting to the embrace without a word, laughed aloud in her reckless way.

Neither Doctor Rube, nor Boxfield, nor Griff, could interrupt them, for all felt that Iron-Armed Abe knew what he was about; and the former remembered the mysterious person only referred to by pronoun of whom Abe had spoken to Diamond.

Gradually The Wild's laughter died away and she lay silent and motionless in the hunchback's arms. He, too, was silent for a time, but he finally raised his head.

"Come!" he said, his voice full of soft melody.

"Let us go to Black Pit."

And then they toiled up the mountain, the deranged woman always carried in his iron arms. And they who followed commented only in whispers; even Griff was prepared to admit that Abe might have a claim stronger than his own.

"Norola said Ther Wild hed found a page outer her old life when she see'd Diamond, an' now I reckon another hez cropped up. Poor Norola!"

Griff could not long keep his mind from the subject nearest his heart.

"Be of good cheer," said Boxfield. "If Miss Norola is really in this slime-bed of sin she is going to be rescued. I am with you to the death."

And then the two men shook hands and the junior felt that no stern parent would ever stand in his way if he saw fit to make love to Norola.

But Black Pit was reached and they prepared to descend. It was unpleasant work for Doctor Rube and Ned, who knew nothing of the way, but The Wild was wholly passive in the hands of the hunchback.

All reached the home of the strange being safely, and then he outdid himself in making everything comfortable for the madwoman. She, however, looked at the gloomy rocks with anything but pleasure and cowered at his side.

"Don't be afraid, Little Nora," he said, again smoothing her tangled hair. "I am with you and I will shield you from all harm. Have no fear, little one; have no fear!"

And then the spectators were amazed when he broke into an old, soothing nursery song, such as each one had heard at his mother's knee, and sung with womanly tenderness. His rare voice had never been more melodious, and one would have sworn by the sound that a little child was being hushed to sleep.

The Wild, on her part, grew strangely calm and gentle under his ministrations until her weary eyes closed, her breathing became deeper and steadier, and she slept. She had been hushed to a forgetfulness of earthly trouble as she had often been in her childhood.

The spectators were very silent during this time, for even Griff could not find words to speak of Norola. Abe's lullaby was at once strange, uncanny and touching. They waited patiently until The Wild slept, and then he laid her weary head down and stole to their side in a cautious way. His rude face was softened by a new light and he looked strangely gentle.

"It is little Nora," he said, in a whisper.

"Little Nora?" questioned Doctor Rube.

"Yes."

"But we don't understand; we never heard the name before. Did you know her once?"

The hunchback looked surprised.

"Know her? She is my sister," he said, simply.

They had suspected such might be the case, but it was a surprise, nevertheless, and Griff, at least, was well pleased to find that "The Wild" had got back another page.

"Tell me about her, ef you will," he said.

"What's her full name an' whar did ye live? What made her wild?"

A quick change passed over the hunchback's face. It grew dark and threatening; he became the Destroyer in an instant, and his long arm was stretched forth toward the City of the Desert.

"What made her mad? Who but King

Diamond? Who else could be so base as he? Who could come to a happy home and spread destruction? Ay, Diamond it was, and for his work he shall die like a dog. Look at Little Nora! Does she resemble the pretty child she was when Diamond's deadly shadow fell at our door?"

"I take it he did her a wrong, an' that's why ye hate him so," suggested Griff, patiently.

"Ay, he broke her heart," said the hunchback, wildly. "Listen! Our home was on White Pine Ridge, in California. Our father was a Forty-niner; our mother died when Little Nora was a babe. I was twelve years her elder, but I loved her, loved her, loved her. I was deformed and ugly, while she was as pretty as a violet, but she never turned from me coldly; she loved me as well as though I was straight as a forest pine. It was a fatal day when our father brought a young and handsome stranger there, for it was Diamond. He had fallen from a cliff, while hunting, and broken his arm. Would to Heaven it had been his neck!"

The hunchback beat himself on his breast, and his tears fell fast over his bronzed cheeks.

"That was the beginning," he resumed, after a pause. "Why should I linger on what followed? Diamond's eyes were as keen as his heart was bad; he saw how pretty was my sister, and he aspired to amuse himself as gallants will with those who know not their fiendish acts. She—Little Nora—unused to the world and as innocent as a mere child, came to believe him a god. She loved, she worshiped him. I, too, trusted him. I was almost as trustful as she, and I could not see how any one could think evil of Little Nora. I made myself his friend—ab-b-b! his friend!"

The words were bitted out in a way which made Ned Boxfield recoil, and again Abe beat his broad breast in almost ungovernable rage.

"A few brief, delusive weeks followed. We gave him our best and I taught him to hunt every species of game that roved over White Pine Ridge. He was with Little Nora too much—by far too much. The fool's paradise passed and Diamond was gone—gone without a word of farewell except the note he left to tell us in half-apologetic words that he was as false as Satan himself. He had gone forever from Little Nora, whom he had taught to love him so well."

"And that's her," Griff said, looking at The Wild.

But Iron-Armed Abe went on unheedingly.

"The trail of the serpent was not on her honor, for that was founded on a rock, but it was on her heart. She loved him—pretty Little Nora—and his desertion broke her heart. She disappeared, and we believed she had drowned herself in Swift-water Run. Our father drooped and died, and I was left alone; alone for vengeance!"

The Destroyer stretched one hand toward Diamond's city and his face was full of an awful, but lofty wrath. They comprehended how he had found "Little Nora" in the poor, deranged woman, and though Griff shivered and thought of Norola in the same hands, no one had the heart to urge other matters upon him then.

One moment the hunchback stood thus, and then he turned and went back to The Wild. He bent over her, touched her tangled hair and a tear fell on her wrinkled cheek. Then in the dark crater again arose his lullaby, as though a mother watched, and prayed, and sung over her sleeping child.

CHAPTER XXXI.

DIAMOND AND NOROLA.

The alarm which sounded through Captain Diamond's house brought that man out of bed as though he had been an automaton. He bounded out with a revolver in each hand and stood glaring about like a hunted murderer at bay. Each corner of his room seemed to contain a foe, for the relentless hunt maintained upon him by Iron-Armed Abe had made him a coward in the midst of his power and splendor.

As he stood thus his black hair was in strong contrast to his pale face and the serpent's eye glared and glittered as though it would aid him to ferret out a hiding foe.

When he saw that he was free from the presence of the only man he feared—the hunchback Destroyer—his expression changed. He became in a moment the cool, brave king of the secret city and, throwing a cloak over his shoulders, he passed through the door.

Outside he met Redspur, who seemed on the point of knocking.

"What is it?" he demanded, imperiously.

"There is an alarm," the Black Rider evenly answered, "and some of your servants say strangers were in the house. I have scattered the men in every direction to intercept them."

"And the prisoners?"

"Rainbolt has gone to them."

Before more could be said the man last named reappeared. He looked troubled and hesitated, but a stamp of Diamond's foot recalled him to his senses.

"The two prisoners are gone!" he humbly said.

"And the guards?"

"They say no one has passed them."

"They lie, and they shall pay for their negligence with their lives. Bring them to me!"

"Captain, there is one thing more."

"What is that?"

"Broadbelt lies dead in the basement!"

Diamond pushed forward and, closely followed by Redspur and Rainbolt, sought the place the latter had mentioned. There lay one of the Black Riders dead, but not yet cold. Diamond bent over him and then arose.

"His neck is dislocated, and we all know whose resistless hands have done the work. Iron-Armed Abe has been here!"

The trio looked at each other with anything but pleasure pictured on their faces. Rainbolt shivered, but Redspur pointed to the outer air.

"My place is there; I may intercept him. Shall I go?" he asked.

"Go!" Diamond tersely answered.

Then he ordered the two guards brought before him. They were the same who had slept at their post, watched by Griff while the prisoners were rescued, and their faces were deadly pale as they faced their dreaded leader. The shadow of death was before them.

"Ironwood and Steelbar," said Diamond, in a voice which was terrible in spite of its calmness, "you have sealed your own death-warrants. You have allowed my prisoners to escape."

The trembling wretches protested their innocence, and swore they had attended to their duty and that no man had passed them; but their words fell on barren soil.

"Take them away, Rainbolt," directed Diamond, "and confine them in the same cell. They die at daybreak."

They were hurried away despite their prayers, and Diamond turned to a new-comer.

"Well, Heavyhand?"

"The chief sent me, sir," answered the man.

"I saw four men on the mountain, one of whom was Iron-Armed Abe. Redspur thinks two of the others were the escaped prisoners, and he has hurried a score of the Riders toward Black Pit."

"Very well. Is that all?"

"One thing more, captain. I saw a strange woman, with wild dress and a wilder face, start up in their path and stop them with strange words. Iron-Armed Abe seemed to recognize her, and he took her to his breast and called her 'Little Nora.'"

Diamond put one hand against the wall as though for support, and his face was, if possible, paler than before. The serpent's eye, too, glowed but dimly.

"Malediction!" he gasped, regardless of his men, "they have met at last!"

One moment he cowered thus, and then his head arose with the old haughty manner.

"Enough!" he said. "Get to your places, one and all."

They went and he returned to his own room. Pouring a glass of brandy he swallowed it like water.

"The shadow deepens!" he muttered. "The accursed hunchback has seen her, despite all my care, and now that he knows what she has suffered he will be worse than ever. Very likely he will no longer hold himself back but endeavor to kill me. I will offer an immense reward for his capture, dead or alive, in the morning. Curse the old prophecy! but for that I would try my own hand upon him!"

He played restlessly with the great jewel at his breast, flashing its rays here and there.

"Guard me! guard me!" he muttered, somberly.

It was a strange appeal, but there were times when King Diamond seemed little less deranged than The Wild. Strange to say, no one except the hunchback understood his peculiarities; but they had not roamed White Pine Ridge in vain in the old days.

"These men were seen at the door of my captive bird," he resumed, anon, "and I will now go and see if they had speech with her. I hope they did."

He went to the same door upon which Abe had been working when discovered, unlocked it and passed through. A light was burning and a bed-chamber was revealed, but it showed an untouched couch. The only occupant of the room sat in a chair, fully clad in a traveling-suit.

It was Norola.

She looked at Captain Diamond with her large eyes growing larger and darker with apprehension, but he bowed with an assumption of politeness.

"I feared you had been disturbed by the sounds about the house," he explained, "and though the hour is untimely, called to assure you all is well. Have you seen anything?"

"No, sir," she faintly answered.

"Some thieves broke into the house," he carelessly said, convinced that she spoke the truth; "that is all. Pardon me, but I see you have not retired. Night is the time to sleep and rest."

"Can you expect a prisoner to sleep?"

"Do not call yourself that, dear lady. You are my guest, and just as safe as though in your old home. It is true, circumstances have com-

pelled me to use some precautions, but I am your friend and you need have no fear."

He spoke soothingly, but as though to give the lie to his words the serpent's eye twinkled maliciously in her face.

"Where is Miss Templeton?" she asked.

"In her own room."

"Will you not allow us to remain together?"

"Such is my wish," he said, with an embarrassed air, "but she will not agree to it. She says she washes her hands of you."

Norola's hand trembled perceptibly.

"Tell me truthfully," she said, "is Leora Templeton as false as she seems?"

Diamond walked across the room and back again before he answered.

"You may as well know the truth now as ever," he finally said. "Leora is not an angel, in the moral sense of the word, though she is a very sensible young woman. She decoyed you from your home to this place at my request."

All the fresh color faded from Norola's face, leaving it whiter than Diamond's own.

"If it was but a plot, she is false than the king of the lost!" she cried in terror.

Diamond smiled.

"Leora is my good friend, and has been for years. A few days ago—after I had seen and learned to love you, my dear girl—I went to her and said, 'I want Norola at my desert kingdom,' and I laid my plans to secure you. She went to you and said that your father and one in whom she was interested were on the Rattleplan Plain and in great danger. She wanted you to go with her and save them. You naturally suggested that several men be added to the party, but that was not in accordance with her plan. She said there was no time; and you mounted your horses and—came here. I explain this because I want you to understand the situation. Leora is a fine girl, an excellent girl; but she has little nonsense in her nature. I am her best friend, and I have but to suggest and she obeys."

Norola sat looking at him in dumb dismay for several seconds. She saw at last just the trap she was in, and she almost wished the lightning would fall and strike her lifeless in her chair. She had always had a horror of the smooth-spoken villain before her, and she saw she was at last fully in his power.

"Such are the facts of the case," Diamond added; "but I beg that you will be under no uneasiness. This city is rather rough, as cities go, but I am your protector, and my word is law here. I have but to command and all is done as I direct. Believe me, I am your friend."

"Then, in mercy's name, return me to my home!" she faintly said.

"But I have other plans, my dear."

She fell on her knees at his feet.

"Mercy—have mercy!" she brokenly implored.

"One would think I was a tiger or boa-constrictor," he answered, wholly unmoved—"I am neither; I am your best friend."

He stooped and pressed a kiss on her cheek. She sprung to her feet, recoiling as though he were indeed a boa-constrictor; but he laughed lightly and turned toward the door.

"Business calls me away," he said, pausing at the threshold; "but I will visit you again tomorrow. Until then be of good cheer—all will be well."

He passed out, locking the door behind him; but his face was far from being smiling.

"I'm not so sure all will be well," he muttered.

"Unless I can capture Iron-Armed Abe I may be dead in the midst of my power before another day. I would give all I possess in this world to thrust the White Pine Ridge episode from out my history!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

DOCTOR RUBE BECOMES A "BLACK RIDER."

THE night brought no change to the party in the volcano. The Wild slept well, for when her periods of restlessness occurred Abe would repeat his lullaby until she became as calm and peaceful as a child.

They made a touching picture and one which neither of the other men thought of smiling at. For Abe to treat a woman of thirty years as a child might have seemed folly under some circumstances, but it was nothing of the kind in the present case.

His clouded mind overlooked the fact that years had rolled on since his mad sister was the "Little Nora" of White Pine Ridge, and his manner showed what their life must have been before Diamond came like an evil spirit into their paradise.

Griff was the most restless person in the strange refuge. All arguments to the contrary could not convince him but that he had seen Norola in Diamond's house, and he was always ill at ease. At times he spoke of going single-handed to rescue her, but Doctor Rube and Boxfield managed to keep him from any injudicious act.

Every attempt to enlist the hunchback in their hopes and fears was vain until Doctor Rube bethought himself to plainly state that the same man who had broken Little Nora's heart had another in his clutches; then his mood

changed and he talked freely and carefully with them.

If Norola was really in the city it would be no easy affair to rescue her after the alarm of the night. What had there occurred would show Diamond that even his own house was not free from the tread of Iron-Armed Abe and he would use every precaution; the place might even be lighted, and guards on duty, all through the night.

"And no more of them will sleep at their post," the hunchback significantly added.

"What can we do?" Ned gloomily asked.

"All must be left to the developments of the future. To-morrow I will go to the town and learn just how matters stand, and then we will see."

"Kin nothin' be did till to-morrer night?" Griff asked.

"It would be madness to try."

The matter was left thus, but Iron-Armed Abe had a new idea and he soon asked Rube to go aside with him.

"You're a doctor!" he abruptly asked.

"Yes."

"There's some one in there who needs a doctor's help; some one who has lost their mind. I'm a rich man and—but come with me!"

He led the way to a niche and, removing a slab of rock, revealed enough gold-dust and nuggets for a generous fortune. It was a rarely attractive sight, but Abe shrugged his shoulders.

"There's enough more where that came from. The Horseshoe is full of it. It is Golden Creek that gives Diamond's men their object, but I can show them richer spots on the mountain. Here, under our feet, is my collection. It would bring over a hundred thousand dollars in San Francisco. I will give you every ounce of it if you will give Little Nora her mind!"

Doctor Rube gravely shook his head.

"I am very sorry to disappoint you, but I cannot help her. I believe I am justified in saying that no living surgeon could give the light of reason back. As she now is, so must she remain to the end of her life."

Abe touched the gold again and his lips quivered.

"A hundred thousand dollars, and all for one operation," he slowly said.

"Your offer is a princely one, but I examined your unfortunate sister at Griff's cabin and I know I cannot aid her."

The hunchback sighed.

"Poor Little Nora! Poor Little Nora!"

It was all he said; but when he had again covered the gold, he led Rube near the central crater.

"I believe we shall not inhabit Black Pit much longer," he said. "The internal fire is growing more active, and ere many days the demon of Smoky Mountain will burst loose. Then, woe unto whatever is in its track! Scorching lava will flow down over Golden Valley and bury King Diamond's city beneath it. Then the only green spot on this part of the desert will disappear, and, it may be, future generations will not suspect that a city stood here."

"But what of us when this occurs?"

"We must watch and flee in time. I have expected it long and watched well. Within the last week there has been a decided change, and noticeably within a day. The heat increases, a light shows in the crater, the smoke is denser, and on the whole, I think I may prophesy that in a week the mountain will be an active volcano."

Doctor Rube shivered a little, for he had no love for a home in the maw of such a monster, but Abe was very calm and practical. He said the crater must be watched, as though it was a spider to be crushed under one's heel when it became troublesome, and then led the way back to the other members of his family.

The Wild was again restless, and he smoothed her hair and resumed his lullaby, and as Doctor Rube lay down to get a little sleep himself, he heard as the last audible sounds, the familiar old cradle-song.

The following day brought no great events. The Wild awoke in her best mood, but Abe was unable to get a sign of recognition. She was disposed to be friendly to all, but the brother could arouse no echo of the past that included him. Now and then she spoke of "Lucifer," meaning Diamond, of course, but that was all.

Abe went out during the day, after repeatedly asking Griff not to leave Little Nora for a moment. When he came back he reported that Norola was indeed a prisoner in Diamond's home, and, as near as he could learn, she had been lured there by Leora Templeton.

Griff clinched his hands and swore a great vow of vengeance against one who could thus forget the duty of woman to woman, but Doctor Rube, thinking of the wondrous beauty of the misguided creature—he would not call her wicked—sighed and was very silent.

Toward night the hunchback asked the doctor to go outside the crater. This he believed to be safe as long as he had charge of affairs. They stood together so near the yawning chasm that the smoke floated over them and served to hide them from view.

"You ask me how the girl is to be rescued," Abe then said. "Well, I can see but one way. Some one of us must go inside the house and help her. It cannot be me, for I cannot go secretly and all men here know my form."

"Can any of us go openly?"

"You must go that way if you go at all. Hear my plan: I propose that one of the Black Riders be captured and that you enter Diamond's house disguised in his place. His clothes will help a good deal, and darkness may do the rest."

The suggestion was far from being a pleasant one to entertain, but Doctor Rube resolved to run the risk if it came to that. If any one went it must be he. If he had told the fact, he would have said his reason was to be near Leora Templeton once more; he could not shake off the charm of her presence, though he did cordially despise himself for yielding to it.

While thinking thus he had entirely forgotten everything else, but he was suddenly aroused as Iron-Armed Abe made a spring from his side and dropped on something among the rocks like a panther on its prey.

Doctor Rube saw a confused struggle, in which two men seemed to be blended, and then the hunchback arose and came forward with his late antagonist firmly held in his arms.

The latter wore the dress of the Black Riders and looked terribly alarmed, but it was the fruit of spying on the Destroyer. Keen ears had Abe, and those who molested him meddled at great risk.

He did not stop at Rube's side, and the doctor was surprised to see him hold the struggling wretch above his head and above the crater, where the smoke curled around him. It made a thrilling tableau, and one Rube could not raise his voice to break, horrified as he was.

"Down!" cried Iron-Armed Abe, in a terrible voice. "Down and feed the volcano fires!"

A shriek broke from the man's lips, but the hunchback stepped back and laughed mockingly.

"Fool!" he said, "you need have no fear; not at present. We need you too much in another way to send you down to the volcano, demon as you are. Doctor, the chance of which I speak has come."

Rube nodded and together they carried the prisoner down the crater to their quarters. He was as badly frightened as a man could be, but received no pity from any one.

When fairly in the midst of the whole party, he was ordered to answer their questions truthfully. The most important one asked was his name, which, after the eccentric fashion of the Black Riders, proved to be Bentbush. It seemed quite appropriate just then, for he was certainly badly "bent."

A long conversation ensued among the little party of volcano residents and it was finally decided that Doctor Rube should enter the lair of King Diamond as a spy, and in Mr. Bentbush's clothing. Abe knew so much about the place that he would be able to tell him nearly all he did not know, and it was very much in their favor that Bentbush belonged to a division which was to stand on guard in Diamond's house. As a result, Doctor Rube could introduce himself without any great trouble.

It was a wild plan, but not so bad as it seemed. Nature had made him and Bentbush a good deal alike in face and form, and when he had donned the Black Rider costume he was pronounced liable to succeed by all except Boxfield.

On his own part, the doctor was aware that it was a foolhardy undertaking, but he thought of Leora and did not hesitate. With the perversity of a man in love he was reluctant even then to believe Leora was in the City of the Desert.

He cursed his folly in the moment of its conception, even while resolving to carry it on, in which particular he was like a good many other men.

Thus it was that, having been escorted to the foot of the mountain by Iron-Armed Abe, he took his way shortly after dark toward the heart of the village.

With the die fairly cast he entered into the adventure with all possible resolution and ease of bearing, and one would not have suspected he was anything more than he seemed as he moved along the street.

He reached Diamond's home and knocked at a certain door described by the hunchback. The knock was peculiar, being the signal of the band, and the door at once opened. Redspur stood before him.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LEORA.

DOCTOR RUBE felt a momentary thrill of doubt as he saw the Black Rider chief, but the test had not yet come. Without a glance at him Redspur passed through the door, and as the false member saw that he was going out he merely saluted him and the chief went his way.

The doctor entered the room. It was of good size and none too well lighted. Half a dozen of the Black Riders were present, four of whom

were playing cards and the others amusing themselves as best they could; all of which was as the spy had been told he would find matters.

He crossed the room, sat down where his face would be in the shadow and began to smoke. One of the other men had nodded to him, and that was all the notice he received.

He looked curiously at his companions. All seemed so much alike that he wondered how they could distinguish each other without a fair look, and where Diamond had managed to pick up such a crowd.

Perhaps half an hour had passed when the door at the side of the room opened and Camp appeared in the opening. He glanced from one to another of the men and finally settled his gaze on Doctor Rube.

"Bentbush!" he called.

Rube was Bentbush for the time being, and he promptly arose and saluted the prime-minister.

"Follow me!" ordered Camp.

The doctor obeyed, feeling an awkward conviction that all his fellow Black Riders were looking at him, but the door finally closed behind him and he was alone with Camp.

The prime-minister looked at him with a fixedness which made him grow uncomfortably warm, conveying the idea, as it did, that he was suspected.

But he mistook Camp's thoughts.

"Bentbush," he said, "you have a sort of sanctimonious look."

"Thank you, sir," said Bentbush, gravely.

"And I dare say, can keep a straight face, and maintain an assumed character?"

"Tolerably well, sir."

"Well, you are wanted to play the parson to-night."

"The parson?"

"Yes. To be plain, Bentbush, I am going to be married. You remember the girl prisoner lately brought here—Norola is her name. Well, I have taken a fancy to her, and as our gracious captain is a kind ruler, he has consented to forego sundry plans he had for himself, and let me have her as my wife. As we lack a parson, some other good man must officiate, and as you are a hypocritical-looking rascal, I select you!"

And Camp punched Mr. Bentbush in the ribs, as though the joke was a good one.

"Hal hal! Very good. But about this ceremony. You want me to marry you and the girl, if I get the idea."

"Exactly; that is my idea."

Doctor Rube felt a strong desire to knock the old villain over the head; but he was wise enough to refrain for awhile. He clearly saw, however, that Norola had ample need of some friend at the City of the Desert.

"I haven't any idea of their lingo parsons fire off on such occasions," he said, with considerable coolness; "but if you can fix that, I kin keep my face straight."

"That's what I want to speak about, Mr. Bentbush, and I will give you half an hour to learn it by heart from the book. Come with me!"

Doctor Rube followed, and was conducted to a room where no other person was visible. Camp showed him a book lying on the table beside the lamp, and bidding him look it over enough to seem tolerably familiar with it, as a minister should, left the room.

The success of his fraud up to that time was very encouraging to the doctor, but he began to think he had become engaged in an enterprise too much for his genius.

How was he to save Norola from the fate which menaced her? This was the great question in his mind, as it might well be, for the ways and means did not seem numerous. He was her only friend in the City of the Desert, he had no time to return to Smoky Mountain, even if the idea was otherwise practicable, and though Iron-Armed Abe had promised to be near he did not know where to find him.

Doctor Rube tried to get a grasp on the subject, while to sustain the character of Bentbush, if any one was watching, he mechanically looked at the printed page of his book, and saw a confused medley of marriage expressions float before his eyes.

At this moment, too, he became conscious of a murmur of voices, and the fact that they were feminine at once aroused his interest. They seemed to proceed from an adjoining room, and he arose, and went to the connecting door. The voices then became so distinct that he not only distinguished the exact words, but the calm, even tones of the person speaking were as familiar as anything in life.

The speaker was Leora Templeton.

"My dear," he heard her say, "I think you are very foolish to look at this matter in such a light."

"And are human hearts and souls to be bartered like goods in a market?" cried a second voice, so full of sharp mental pain as to make Rube's face grow even darker—and the more so since he again recognized a well-known voice.

The last speaker was Norola.

"Marriage," said Leora, with icy calmness. "is woman's end, or aim, in life. It is for that she was created, and it is the one thing for

which she need exert herself. It should be her ambition to make a brilliant marriage; one which assures her wealth and position; this talk about love is all nonsense; it is the fancy of an empty-headed dreamer. Marry only for money, my dear Norola. Well, here is Mr. Camp, a very fine gentleman and a millionaire. He offers you his heart, his hand and his millions. You are very foolish if you don't take them."

The fictitious Bentbush had never heard a more unfeeling, cold-blooded speech than this synopsis of Miss Templeton's peculiar views, and he ground his teeth in impotent rage.

"I would as soon marry a mummy!" cried Norola. "Money may be your idol, but it isn't mine. I have still some human feeling left, I hope."

"Human feeling is a regard for one's advance in worldly position; your views are foolish and sentimental. I tell you it is to your advantage to marry Mr. Camp. You do not know how rich he is. Golden Valley is full of the auriferous soil; it was that, and a desire to monopolize it, that made this a secret city. Camp is worth millions. Will you throw away such a chance?"

Doctor Rube made a gesture of loathing. Miss Leora's sentiments were such that he could hardly crush the desire to lay hands on her and shake out such a villainous doctrine.

Must Norola be contaminated by her?

"You had better marry Camp yourself," retorted Norola.

"Thank you; I have other views."

"I have heard something about the Templeton case, so-called."

"People hear a good many things they had better not hear."

"For instance, it is said you are not Leora Templeton," Norola defiantly continued.

"That is my affair, not yours. Let us speak of Camp."

"That is my affair, not yours. I'll have nothing to do with Camp."

There was a pause, during which Doctor Rube could imagine the two young women facing each other angrily. Finally, Leora spoke again.

"Very well, miss, you can use your own judgment in the case. I have advised you to proceed sensibly, but since you disregard my advice you must walk your own path. I tell you, however, that Mr. Camp will not humor you in your romantic views."

"Right, quite right, my dear ladies," answered another voice which Rube knew to be Camp's. "Miss Templeton has presented the case in its true light. You are young yet, my dear Norola, and you don't see what a blessing it would be to unite your fortunes with my own."

"I'd sooner unite them with a toad's!" declared Norola.

"Willful, still."

"You and I may as well understand each other," said Norola, bravely. "I'm not going to commit any such supreme folly as marrying you, and I'll scratch your eyes out if you come near me. You hear, I suppose?"

Camp acknowledged that he did hear, and a sharp exchange of words followed. In this conversation the voice of Leora did not appear, but Doctor Rube did not suspect that she had left the room until, hearing the rustle of a dress near him, he suddenly turned his eyes and saw that he was no longer alone in his own room.

He stood face to face with Leora Templeton. One moment there was an ominous pause, but the counterfeit Bentbush saw by her looks of wild surprise that he was recognized, and he sprang forward and grasped her arm.

"Not a word!" he exclaimed. "Do not dare to sound the alarm, or I may forget that you are a woman!"

His frowning face added to the menace, and a little of her color receded from her cheeks.

"Unhand me!" she exclaimed, excitedly.

"Not until you promise," he icily answered. "I find you in a position now where I can no longer doubt, and you see me in a position where my life hangs poised as by a thread. Such being the case I shall not hesitate; I shall deal with you rigorously."

"You will only make your situation worse," she said, defiantly. "Captain Diamond will put you to the severest tortures."

He laughed mockingly.

"At last you speak plainly. In San Francisco you were an angel, and 'St. Jerome' was another. You were incapable of wrong and so was he. Neither of you knew aught about the City of the Desert. Bah! I did not believe you then, and I have seen my suspicions confirmed. I know you as you are."

"What am I?"

"A base adventuress!"

A quick shadow, as though of mental pain, crossed the girl's face, and she pressed one hand over her heart as though the pain went deeper.

"Have I sunk as low as this?" she muttered, as though addressing herself.

"Can you doubt it, when you remember the advice you have just given Norola? She is young, good and innocent. You seek to ruin her—and you are a woman, too! What a heart does your fair exterior cover; what a

depth of sin lurks behind the fairest face of which I know! Oh! Leora, Leora, is your heart devoid of all humane and womanly impulses—are you all bad?"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BENTBUSH MEETS WITH TROUBLE.

ONCE more had Doctor Rube forgotten his presence of mind in the light of Leora Templeton's beauty and magnetism. He felt hopelessly stranded and wrecked. He was beset by contradictory emotions. He felt that he ought to hate and despise this woman, whom he had heard condemned from her own mouth, and he did lash himself into a sort of fury; but in the midst of it all he was still conscious of the old fascination and, honorable man that he was, and evil as was she, he felt a strong desire to fling himself at her feet and cry:

"Abandon these people and go with me; let me be the object of your love and life and I will never oppose you again!"

It would have been a wild, unreasoning, wretched step, and he fortunately controlled himself.

His last words, however, were like a lost soul's cry and Leora plainly did not hear with indifference. Paler yet was her face, tighter yet was the pressure of her hand over her heart, and she put out one hand imploringly.

"Spare me! spare me!" she exclaimed.

"Spare yourself," he gloomily answered, "Your fate is in your own hands. But, Miss Templeton, let me call your attention to the poor child in yonder room. She is younger than you, and she is innocent and honorable. Must she be sacrificed to these birds of prey? You find me here in a strange role. Let me speak plainly—I must and will trust you. I came to rescue Norola from these wretches, but my way is not clear. Aid me, I beseech you, and let us save a deserving woman from her foes."

His speech was unfortunate in more than one respect. He abandoned her case abruptly and almost harshly, and he laid a stress on Norola's character not pleasant to one less honorable than she. In fact, he did wretchedly, as a man usually does when he attempts to guide a woman's heart, and even in the moment when Leora was growing softened he again hardened her heart.

"It is a pity you did not make this your motto before you tried to prove me an impostor," she said, bitterly.

"Madam, in Heaven's name do not recall that subject. If we are enemies let it go at that, but do not make it a reason for leaving Norola to her foes."

Before she could answer a hand was laid on the knob of the door and he heard Camp's voice outside giving some direction to a servitor.

He caught Leora's arm.

"The crisis is at hand," he exclaimed. "Camp is about to enter here, and my future depends on you. If you remain silent my disguise will protect me; if you reveal my identity I am a dead man!"

With these words he hurriedly reseated himself at the table and bent over the book Camp had given him. His back was toward Leora and he had no clew to the course she intended to pursue, but he devoted himself to the book as closely as though her loyalty was assured, and then raised his head slightly and with outward respect as Camp re-entered the room.

The old rascal was in very high spirits, and he at once nodded to Leora.

"I thank you very much, very much," he said. "Your assistance is invaluable, for the young creature begins to see the folly of her former course. My sincere gratitude is yours, Miss Templeton. And you, Bentbush—have you committed this affair to memory somewhat?"

Doctor Rube respectfully replied that he had. His back was still toward Leora, but he expected every moment that she would announce his identity. It was a critical moment, but the clock on the shelf told several additional seconds and the expected revelation did not occur.

He looked secretly over his shoulder; Leora had gone to the window and was looking out into the night.

"Come with me, and you shall now don your clerical dress. When I introduce you as Parson William no one must suspect you are anything less than a parson."

Camp again chuckled as he led the way, but Rube was not in that mood. To dress in a clergyman's outfit he must lay aside his present dress, and on that he had relied as a disguise. Seen without it, Camp would be dull indeed not to recognize him.

As he went through the door he tried in vain to attract Leora's attention; she remained cold and indifferent, if appearances were to be trusted, and he went on after Camp in silence.

His situation had become a hard one. There was great need of doing something for Norola, but how was it to be done? Of course a marriage performed by him would not be legal, but the trouble lay in the fact that the girl would not be safe while she remained in the power of the evil wretches who ruled the place.

How was she to be saved?

This question was put aside for the moment as Camp ushered him into a room where a sober suit of black was tossed over a chair. This was plainly what Bentbush was to wear for the occasion ahead of him.

Nor was this all. At one side of the room Captain Diamond sat reading a book. He did not lower it as they entered, but he glanced at the disguised doctor in so keen a way that the latter became very uncomfortable.

Camp saluted his superior and walked to his side, and then Rube heard them speak of Norola and the approaching marriage; but while they talked Diamond still looked at the fictitious Bentbush.

His scrutiny was most disagreeable, but its object made the best of it and tried to be at ease in outward appearance. That he was suspected he no longer doubted; the serpent's eye at the captain's breast seemed to twinkle with triumph.

Finally the latter raised his voice.

"Go about your other duties, Camp, and I will see Bentbush in his new dress. Do not come to us; we will meet you in the Blue Chamber."

The prime-minister retired without argument and then Diamond came nearer to Doctor Rube.

"Do you feel equal to the occasion ahead of you, Bentbush?" he lightly asked.

Rube said that he did, trying to speak as much like his original as possible.

"Camp made a very good choice, for you look like a professional man, anyway."

"Do I, sir?"

"A good deal. And it strikes me you must take naturally to disguises."

Doctor Rube could no longer doubt that he was known.

"Thank you," he grimly answered.

"Camp showed excellent judgment in selecting you; he did far better than he knew. Don't you think so, Doctor Reuben Leyden?"

"Possibly he did, Mr. St. Jerome."

There was no longer any attempt at concealment. The two men stood face to face and looked into each other's eyes. The diamond on the adventurer's breast glimmered as though in voluble appreciation of the situation.

"You are a fool, Leyden," the captain said after a pause.

"Why?"

"Because you have voluntarily put your head into the lion's mouth after making good your escape."

"If so, there was an excuse for my folly. Of that let us say nothing. I am in trouble, as I freely admit, but I am not yet subdued."

"Indeed!"

"No, Captain Diamond," continued Rube in a clear, keen voice. "It may be I shall never leave here alive, but I am not going to be led like a bullock to the shambles. Captain Diamond, you are my prisoner!"

With a sudden movement Doctor Rube drew his revolver and thrust the muzzle against the captain's breast. The movement was an ominous one, but Diamond did not move a muscle.

"A pretty toy. What do you intend to do with it?"

"I intend to control your actions for some time to come. I will be frank enough to say I am here to rescue Norola. Nature and humanity would recoil at the thought of seeing her married to Camp, and I will risk all for her. I have no actual enmity against you, sir, though if Ben Bolter had done his work well you would have been entirely free from me; but I intend to rescue Norola. I hold you at the muzzle of this weapon. Release Norola and all will be well; refuse, and as my life will not be worth a picayune anyway, I will begin proceedings by putting a bullet through you!"

Diamond laughed carelessly.

"The world will never know what it has lost unless you live to appear in Congress. Of that let us not speak now. You threaten to shoot me. Very well; blaze away."

"You had better lose Norola and save your life."

"Oh, I shall save my life in any case. I have no intention of losing it. The fact is, however, I wear a steel plate over my breast and your bullet would be turned aside like a pea."

Doctor Rube quickly changed his line of aim to the fellow's head.

"Perhaps you are plated there also."

"No; you have me this time beyond a doubt. Yet, Leyden, this is all nonsense. You can't control the market if you try. I am in the midst of my men, and any attempt of yours will prove useless. Besides this, you are a mere mote in my path; in a personal encounter I could take care of a dozen like you and never turn a hair."

"Enough of talk!" said Rube, decisively.

"With my pistol at your temple I order you to release Norola. You have given her to Camp and have no personal reason for holding her. If you would save your life, save her!"

Diamond still smiled in his undisturbed way.

"Follow me, then," he said.

"Wait!"

"Well?"

"No tricks, sir. I do not know what thoughts are in your mind, but I swear that if you get

me into trouble my first act will be to shoot you. Deal fairly with me as you value your life."

"You talk nonsense, doctor, but we will overlook it. Follow me!"

"Not yet!"

It was a new voice which spoke, and with a sudden change of expression Diamond wheeled about.

Iron-Armed Abe stood before him.

The hunchback looked as cool and calm as though nothing of importance was afoot, but both Diamond and Rube were astonished to find him inside the house. He had a faculty for going and coming which was wonderful.

"You meditate mischief, King Diamond," he added, "and it will not work. You are safest when watched, and I believe that it is the way to take care of you in the present case. You will not go to bring the girl here but you will give this man, who is acting as one of your band, orders as such to convey her to you. Do this, and do it fairly as you value your life."

CHAPTER XXXV.

A BLOW FOR FREEDOM.

FAR easier breathed Doctor Rube after the coming of Iron-Armed Abe. He had taken a bold stand even while he felt incapable of carrying it on, but when the hunchback came to the front he felt a renewed confidence which arose from his knowledge of his power.

Diamond rose equally affected and his mocking smile vanished.

"What is this girl to you?" he growled.

"That is our affair."

"Very well; I will bring her here if you say so."

"I don't say so. You will remain in this room and send our companion for her. Doctor, settle your helmet-hat well over your head and go for the girl. In case any one objects, send them here for orders. Diamond will then repeat what he is supposed to have told you."

Doctor Rube had a dim idea that he was shouldering a burden about fifty times larger than he could carry, but he made no remonstrance to the plan. He waited for a last motion from the Destroyer and then left the room.

He knew where Norola was to be found and hurried in that direction. His courage was not of a very brilliant sort, but he had the nerve to hang stubbornly to the plan.

At the door of the captive's room one of the Black Riders stood guard—a precaution adopted since the last escape—and Rube faced him boldly and stated that he was to take her to the other apartment. He had expected opposition, but there was none at all and he entered the room, closing the door behind him.

Norola was alone. She was seated in an arm-chair, her manner and expression alike indicative of the profoundest despair. She turned her head as the doctor entered, but seeing as she thought one of the hated Black Riders, appeared indifferent until he placed his hand warningly on his lips.

"Be calm!" he cautioned. "Do not speak an indiscreet word, or you may never see Griff's cabin again. Don't you know me?"

She did know, at last, and she clasped his hands earnestly. Her nature was too brave for a hysterical appeal, but Doctor Rube could see that she realized her peril and was praying for aid.

"I am here to rescue you," he said, "but I have only one friend to aid me and we are in the midst of foes. Stratagem only can save you."

He then briefly indicated who were awaiting in the other room; briefly, because delay was terribly dangerous.

Norola schooled her face to the old expression, and they left the room and started along the hall. But a few steps had been gone, however, when Camp emerged from a side door and stood in their path. He looked astonished at seeing them together.

"What in the world are you doing, Bentbush?" he demanded.

"Captain Diamond's orders are that I take the girl to the room where he is waiting," said the disguised doctor, trying to speak carelessly, but feeling a concern which was not quieted by the trembling of Norola's hand on his arm.

"What's that for?" Camp demanded, with a manner less placid than usual.

"I don't know, sir. Captain Diamond is in the other room."

"I'll go to him."

This was just what Doctor Rube desired. He felt that it would not be safe to have the prime-minister roaming around now that he had got a bee in his bonnet, and it was just as well to take him in and let Iron-Armed Abe deal with him.

So the trio went along the hall, with Camp in advance. The doctor had settled on his course of conduct, and deciding that it would be too much to ask Abe to manage both of the villains, he no sooner saw Camp step one foot over the threshold than he gave him a slight push, at the same time seizing him by the collar, and with the other hand he thrust his revolver against his temple.

"Not a movement or a word of alarm or you

die!" said the counterfeit Bentbush in a terrible voice, as Norola closed the door.

Then the speaker looked for Iron-Armed Abe. He was not visible; both he and Diamond had disappeared from the room.

He felt dismayed. Camp was for the moment inactive—thunderstruck, as it were, by the turn of affairs—but he would soon arouse and make matters warm for the audacious Black Rider. As for the hunchback, there was a door to show where he had gone, but nothing to show where he then was. If he had deserted in this emergency, Doctor Rube had indeed shouldered a burden larger than he seemed capable of carrying.

"You infernal scoundrel!" gasped Camp, recovering his breath, "what do you mean by this outrage?"

"I mean that the cards have gone wrong for you, that you are my prisoner and that your life depends on your keeping a still tongue in your head!"

He forgot to assume Bentbush's voice and his words rung out in a way which was not only thrilling, but which made Camp stare at him in sudden interest.

"Eh? Oh! Ah!" cried the prime-minister, "so it's you, is it? Well, we've got you again."

Conciliament was out of the question and Doctor Rube settled down to sturdy action.

"You never made a greater mistake. The shoe is on the other foot. I've got you and I intend to keep you as long as you are useful. Let me say, too, that if you sound an alarm I will shoot you like the wolf you are. Do you hear?"

Something in his voice changed Camp's manner completely and showed him a thorough coward at heart. He began to shake in Rube's grasp and put in a plea for good treatment, but the doctor cut him short and asked Norola to try the other door.

She did so and found it locked.

Doctor Rube was confused and surprised. What did it mean? The hunchback was not a man to be easily overpowered or to desert a friend—what, then, meant this sudden disappearance of both hunchback and Diamond?

It was a profound mystery.

Several minutes passed in waiting, but Iron-Armed Abe did not return. Rube felt that the passage of time was full of danger, but what could he do? Hemmed in by foes and danger as he was, he felt a strong desire to have the arm of the hunchback to lean upon.

The pause at last became unendurable and he resolved to make an attempt alone. It would be a mean feeling if he was compelled to relinquish Norola without an effort.

"Camp," he said, after meditating for a time, "I am in a position where I must win or lose all. Such being the case I shall proceed according to the demands of the occasion. I am going to make you useful or put a bullet through you. This is plain talk, but you have shown yourself a first-class rascal and I will not be foolishly sentimental. Camp, you must guide me from the city!"

"I—I— Really, you can't expect that," stammered the prime-minister.

"I do expect it, and it will be so. Hear me, Camp: you must guide me faithfully through all my dangers, giving me the protection of your presence. Men seeing you will believe all is well, and you must not deceive them."

"What you ask is impossible."

"How so?"

"I will not guide you! Do you expect me to cut off my own nose?"

"I expect you to guide us and, sir, you will!"

Doctor Rube spoke in an inexorable voice, and rubbed his revolver against the prime-minister's temple until he lost all his courage and declared that he would do anything Rube ordered. He was certainly frightened enough, at that time, to have promised to jump into Black Pit, but would it last?

Doctor Rube called his attention to the fact that if he was himself recaptured his life would be forfeited anyway, and since such was the case, he proposed to proceed boldly and if Camp attempted treachery, shoot him down at once.

This point settled, Norola went to get her outer garments, which was a necessary delay, and Camp was directed to lead the way to the outer world.

He began by unlocking the door Norola had vainly tried, which suggested an idea to Rube. Inquiry developed the fact that only Camp and Diamond possessed keys to it, and deepened the mystery of Iron-Armed Abe's disappearance, but it was not prudent to consult Camp on the affair.

The prime-minister led the way along a hall, down a stairway and to an outer door. They emerged from the house and marched down the street deliberately and in an order planned by Doctor Rube.

Those who saw them gave but a casual glance as they saw Camp arm in arm with a young lady, with what seemed to be one of the Black Riders following at their heels for some purpose known best to Camp—perhaps as a guard.

But, as the reader knows, those who thought

thus made a great mistake. Camp, instead of being monarch of all he surveyed, was in a state of nervous terror. He walked on as Doctor Rube had directed, but though he dared not turn his head he knew "that terrible fellow," as he had named the doctor, was only awaiting a provocation to send a bullet through his head.

We need scarcely say "that terrible fellow" was equally anxious. He had taken the reins in an energetic manner, as a brave man will in emergencies, but in such a hot-bed of enemies he could never feel at ease. He looked at Norola, whom he knew to be one of the most deserving of her sex, and felt that his single arm was but a weak shield when the magnitude of the danger was considered.

They had gone but a few yards when something startling and unexpected occurred.

There was a rending, grinding, crashing sound, mingled with a sort of boom, and the ground shook under them as Doctor Rube had once felt it when some strong chemical exploded in a laboratory and nearly dismembered a dozen of callow surgeons.

But in this case it seemed even more startling, and when several pieces of slate roofing clattered to the ground, all turned to look at the source from which they came.

Diamond's house was no longer the stately building it had been. One-half of it had crumbled, the roof had fallen in, and it was clear that some sort of an explosion had nearly torn it rock from rock.

To add to the excitement of the scene, men, most of whom wore the Black Rider costume, were seen rushing out here and there, and a red light sprang up in the center, showing that the ruin was on fire.

But a wilder, stranger scene was in store for those who looked, and Doctor Rube instinctively uttered a cry at sight of the startling picture suddenly made visible on what remained of the roof.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE MIDNIGHT FLIGHT.

The light which had flashed up from the burning house was strong enough to illuminate the immediate vicinity, and all who looked distinctly saw three men engaged in a desperate struggle on the flat roof. Twined about each other like serpents, they were making revolutions so rapidly that no man of ordinary figure could have been recognized; but Doctor Rube had no difficulty in seeing that one was Iron-Armed Abe.

The other two were plainly tools of Diamond's, and Rube half suspected the captain himself was one.

Men who would otherwise have endeavored to stop the flames paused to watch that fierce contest; even the fugitives forgot that they ought to flee, and merely gazed.

The Destroyer had plainly met men who were no children even in his strong arms, but as the red light crept up higher Rube saw that his movements were a good deal hindered by ropes they had partially succeeded in noosing around him.

Back and forth they struggled, back and forth, now going dangerously near the lapping fire, then reeling close to the eaves with the dizzy descent below; but at all times struggling with unsurpassable fury.

Suddenly Iron-Armed Abe seemed to arouse as though he had cast off the dangerous folds of the rope, and then he was seen in the full splendor of his power.

Those strangely muscular arms made good their claim to the *soubriquet* man had given him. He cast aside his foes as a tiger dashes away a puny cur, and a long, thrilling yell of derision pealed from his throat.

Then, clutching one of his foes, a man dressed as a Black Rider, he raised him aloft and strode to the eaves as though he held but a babe.

Below, two score of men had gathered, and the chance to kill the dread Destroyer was better than ever before; but not one could raise a hand.

Breathless, they watched the hunchback and the doomed wretch, who squirmed in vain in his iron grasp.

One moment they were seen as though for a terrible tableau, and then the Black Rider shot out into the air with all the force Abe's arms could give. Out and down he went, while the Destroyer's wild laugh was mingled with the groans of the crowd, and then with a dull thud his wretched clay met Mother Earth, and his share in life was past.

But another thrilling scene was too close at hand for any one to bend over the Rider.

Another face appeared beside Iron-Armed Abe, and all recognized Diamond. The deadly foes were side by side, and, it almost seemed, separated from the rest of the world.

Diamond's chance for eternal triumph seemed at hand. Abe was laughing wildly, almost maniacally, and the other man might have pushed him from the roof.

Such seemed his purpose for a moment, for his hands were outstretched and his face glowed with an eager light, but even in the moment when triumph seemed to be his he unaccountably paused, the strength seemed to die out from his arms, and he sunk on his knees beside the man he so deeply hated and feared.

Then Iron-Armed Abe turned, laughed even more wildly than before and caught up Diamond as he had caught up his subordinate.

And then the men of the Desert City saw their ruler hovering between life and death.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the Destroyer, "behold King Diamond! Ye fools who bend and fawn when he passes by, and think him the mightiest sovereign of earth, look on him in his weakness. Look at this vile wretch!"

Dead silence reigned in the crowd. The flames were creeping on in the house and there might be

people there who needed their aid, but still they looked, expecting every moment to see Diamond precipitated into their midst as his man had been.

But another element, as destructive and more powerful than Iron-Armed Abe, was gathering in its fury, and a repetition of the crushing, rending sound had no sooner indicated a second explosion than a cloud of sparks and wood flew into the air and then, with an almost human groan, the remaining portion of the house sunk down, roof and walls, into the fiery pit beneath.

At the first demonstration the hunchback was seen to drop Diamond, but neither men made an attempt to escape. They stood erect and only a few feet apart until the fall of the roof caused both to disappear, and then the cloud of sparks which went up was like their epitaph.

Not until this scene was at an end did Doctor Rube arouse from his rapt attention. The various scenes had occurred rapidly despite their force, but had they consumed half an hour he could not have thrown off the spell. When the roof went down he could no longer doubt that both Diamond and his foe had perished in the fiery depths, and he recalled himself to the present.

This was done too late for his good; Camp had seized the opportunity to part from dangerous company and was nowhere to be seen.

Plainly, there was no time to be lost after that. They could no longer rely on Iron-Armed Abe, and it was clear Camp would get his tools together as soon as possible and seize the escaping prisoners; the only wonder was that they were not there already.

Norola was shivering with the emotions the late startling scene had awakened, but she yielded promptly to Rube's hand and their flight was resumed.

At that moment the doctor could think of no way open to them except to return to Black Pit. It was true they must now do without the hunchback's aid, but Griff was a veteran and could be relied upon to do every possible thing for Norola.

So they placed their faces toward Smoky Mountain and went on hurriedly, keeping in the shadows and avoiding other travelers as far as was possible.

Norola had been informed that she was going to Griff, and she seconded Rube in every effort. Even then he thought of Leora and wished his companion would mention her, but he asked no questions, and on his heart was a heavier weight than he would acknowledge as he thought that the chances were the girl had perished in the fire.

One-half the village had been traversed when, among the vague, mingled sounds at the rear, Doctor Rube traced one plain and clear; traced it and caught his breath in a strange way through his set teeth as a suspicion assailed him.

The sound was the bay of a dog, and he believed it was being used to track them in the darkness.

He turned his face toward Norola, uncertain whether it was best to tell her, but she had not lived a wild life in the past, in vain; her lips uttered the words he had mutely put in form.

"I fear you are right," he answered; "in fact, I cannot doubt it. Every second increases the suspicion. The dog is on our track and gaining rapidly."

"What can we do?"

"Keep ahead of him as long as possible and then turn at bay and kill him silently and quickly. From that moment all depends on whether our human foes are at the heels of our brute pursuer."

"The stream of water; cannot that be made useful?"

Doctor Rube had thought of it, but it was so far out of their direct course that he was reluctant to turn. The importance of throwing the dog off the scent—he would otherwise follow them to Black Pit, even if he failed to previously overtake them—influenced him and he made the deviation.

They ran rapidly, but nearer still sounded the bay of the hound and their chances grew desperate.

Further still they went, and then both the river and the dog were near. Doctor Rube saw that he could not use the one to foil the other, and he only thought of making the best use of his time. He had drawn the saber which had come to him as a heritage from Bentbush, and with this he meant to do his best.

A little further and the water of Golden Creek flashes before the fugitives, but the dog is almost at their heels. Doctor Rube sees the folly of further flight and turns at bay. He drops on one knee, ready for the meeting, and none too soon.

A lithe, light-colored form shoots out of the darkness straight toward him, the long-drawn, mournful howl stops short as the man-hunter sees his prey; and then, with a rush, he speeds in to the death, his red jaws opened for the fatal grip.

But it never comes. Kneeling like a rock, Doctor Rube advances the point of the saber with rare judgment, and then, at the critical moment, drives it with all his force, into the tawny breast.

Another howl breaks from the dog's lips, but this time it is one of pain and alarm; dashed to the earth by the force of the collision, he lies kicking and crying for the last time on earth.

Doctor Rube withdraws the saber and springs to his feet, hopeful of a clear retreat then, but his hopes are in vain. There is another sound, and this time human foes emerge from the darkness. He even recognizes Camp and Redspur in the front, with half a dozen stout Riders, this time on foot, in the rear.

Norola uttered a faint cry, and at the sound Doctor Rube became possessed of a sort of fury. He resolved not to yield, in any case, but to fight as long as he had strength, and then die, if need be, in defense of Norola. Even then, with that infatuation he could not resist, he thought of Leora Templeton, and, believing her dead, cared little whether he lived or died himself.

"Back!" he shouted, swinging his red sword before the eyes of the enemy. "Back, you demons! I will brain the man who first advances!"

"Hold, there!" interrupted Redspur, checking his men. "Young fellow, you're too brave a man to die like a dog. Yield, tamely, and I'll swear to do my best for you."

"No, no!" interrupted Camp, shrilly, "he must not live; he must die!"

The sound of his voice, which had become distasteful to Doctor Rube, stung the latter into a still more unnatural fury, and he cut short Redspur's efforts

at peace-making by springing toward Camp like a tiger.

One moment his saber whistled over his head, and then it went down with a rush and flesh and bone parted before it. The sickening thud was followed by a pitch and reel on Camp's part and then he lay dead at the avenger's feet.

What followed the doctor never clearly knew. He had a dim recollection, afterward, of seeing the Black Riders come at him in a body, with Redspur at their head, and then his saber met opposing steel. He had some knowledge of the use of such a weapon, and in his desperate condition he must have fought hard if the terrible encounter he afterward believed took place was not all a myth.

Be that as it may it ended disastrously for him, and with an impression that the mountain had fallen on his head he lost his senses.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE DEMON OF SMOKY MOUNTAIN.

DOCTOR RUBE recovered consciousness after a lapse of time he had no means of computing. He returned to earth, if we may so express it, with an aching head and a vague idea that the mountain which had fallen upon him ought to be thrown off before he would be himself.

Putting out his hands he failed to find any larger mountain than a bump the size of a hen's egg on one side of his head, and he sat erect.

Of all the actors in the recent fight he alone remained. He was by the river, but even the dead dog had disappeared. Norola and the Black Riders were nowhere visible.

"They have recaptured her and left me for dead," he muttered, as he compressed his aching head.

For a moment he was filled with despair as he thought of Norola's new peril and Griff's grief, but the strength of his nature speedily asserted itself and he staggered to his feet.

"Back to Black Pit!" he muttered, resolutely. It was a difficult and wearisome road, for half his strength seemed gone, but no one molested him and he reached the mouth of the crater after a time.

As he toiled down the side he could not but notice the continued change in the place. Heat, light and smoke had each increased, and he thought of the Destroyer's prediction and did not doubt but that the "demon" of the mountain would soon awake in his might.

Full of the unpleasant news he brought, Doctor Rube staggered along the passage to where he had left his friends. Entering, he saw Griff and Ned Boxfield side by side, but he did not address them. Unconscious of the fact that he was covered with dust and blood and made a terrible picture, he sunk upon the floor and again lost consciousness.

When he recovered, his pains seemed a good deal eased and he lay on a comfortable couch, rude though it was. His mind, however, was not clear and he heard a sound which confused him all the more. It was a cradle song, a lullaby he had heard scores of times at his mother's knee, and he was so perplexed at being thus carried back along the road of Time that he opened his eyes.

He was still in the volcano-cave, and only a few yards away Iron-Armed Abe sat with The Wild in his arms and sung the old lullaby with all the melody and tenderness before mentioned.

Doctor Rube looked at him in surprise, wondering how he had escaped from the explosion and fire, but when he saw that both beard and hair were badly burned he knew the escape had been a narrow one.

At this moment Ned Boxfield perceived that his friend was conscious and he sprung forward with joyful words on his lips. Then Doctor Rube learned how he had appeared before them looking more like a dead man than anything else, and how they had worked over him for a long time after he fainted before they were sure he was a live man.

Well, they were once more in Black Pit, and there was no danger for Doctor Rube. He had been hardly used and had lost considerable blood, but he would be all right in a few days.

Of Iron-Armed Abe it was not safe to prophesy. He had returned to the crater half an hour before Rube, considerably singed by the fire, and in a frame of mind no better than that of The Wild. To all their questions he had been apparently deaf, for he had answered nothing. Going straight to "Little Nora," he had taken her in his arms and sung the lullaby as tenderly as ever, but with his gaze fixed on vacancy.

It was a great misfortune for the little party. With Norola once more in the hands of her foes and the hunchback's services lost, the prospect was dark indeed. True, Rube knew Camp would never trouble her more, but Diamond might have escaped; in any case, a city full of enemies remained.

Utterly exhausted, Doctor Rube finally sunk to sleep even while Griff and Boxfield talked. His last impression of the actual world came in the shape of the indistinct tones of Iron-Armed Abe's lullaby.

When he awoke no one was visible except The Wild. He arose and found himself far stronger than he had dared to hope. A day of rest would make him all right. He was about to seek for his companions when Griff and Ned entered. Their faces brightened at sight of him, and after some minor conversation they told what news they had.

The hunchback had aroused, as from a trance, and gone out to learn the state of affairs at the village. He seemed never to tire, and fear was something unknown to him.

Griff and Ned were a good deal troubled by the state of affairs about the volcano. That interesting object was fast assuming a shape which they believed warned them not to remain long in the dangerous retreat.

He went with them to view it again. The work was going on, and where only the center of the crater had formerly been known to send up smoke, the whole diameter was now more or less filled. Heat and gases, too, arose in a way which alarmed the trio, and deep, subterranean thunders told that the demon of the mountain was moving restlessly.

They had unanimously decided that the chamber was no safe place for them in this emergency when the hunchback returned. He showed no trace of his mental disorder, but was the calmest of any one there.

The news he brought was unexpected but far from being unpleasant. Norola was not a captive in

the City of the Desert; at least not in the hands of those in power. Diamond had survived the explosion, like Abe, but he knew nothing of her. Redspur only knew that she had slipped away during the progress of the fight with Doctor Rube.

Abe was sure neither Diamond nor Redspur knew anything about her.

Hearing this report, Griff seized a theory which none of them could shake. Norola was an accomplished swimmer; she must have leaped into Golden Creek and made good her escape. Undoubtedly she was then hiding somewhere in the mountain.

Iron-Armed Abe favored this idea and agreed to search for her, but he agreed with the others that new quarters ought to be found for themselves.

"The demon of Smoky Mountain will not delay much longer," he acknowledged, as a deep boom was heard from the unexplored depths, "and we must go. It would not be strange if the volcano should be in full force of operation twenty-four hours hence. If this should happen, let King Diamond beware! Just as sure as the lava rises to the top of the crater, so sure will the City of the Desert meet the fiery deluge, and if it continues long enough King Diamond's city will be buried forever from the sight of man."

And so they prepared to leave the strange retreat which had so long sheltered the Destroyer. When the top of the crater was reached they were covered with ashes and the stones were uncomfortably hot where, one day before, they had been cool.

Then they went away, never again to look into Black Pit. Denser and darker than of yore arose the smoke, and for yards around ashes strewn the earth and rocks. The demon of Smoky Mountain was indeed arousing.

Iron-Armed Abe led them along the mountain-side toward a new refuge he had in mind. They would have left the vicinity of Golden Valley had they dared, but, knowing the way would be watched by the Black Riders, a wiser course was adopted. Abe was fixed in the belief that the volcano would pour all, or nearly all its eruptive matter to the south, or into the Golden Valley, and that the mountain at the west would be perfectly safe.

Doctor Rube, Griff and Boxfield were worried by the necessity of making this journey by daylight, but Abe was full of quiet confidence. He declared that he could avoid all their foes, because nothing escaped his attention, and a part of his assertion seemed almost proven true when he abruptly ordered a halt by the way and then stole through a fringe of bushes at one side.

Doctor Rube followed. Below them lay a ravine which was from ten to thirty feet deep. Along this, a hundred yards away, a horseman was advancing. Abe afterward declared he had heard him through the rattling of his horse's hoofs, and his ears were certainly very acute.

But this was not all. Behind the man was a second rider—a woman; and only one glance was necessary for Doctor Rube to recognize Norola. She had plainly been captured by one of the Black Riders, and was being borne to the village.

The hunchback seemed to think for a moment, and then, with a word to Rube, moved out on a stout, dwarfed tree which extended horizontally from the side of the gulch, and hung over the path. Once there, Abe extended himself at full length, his whole person concealed by the foliage, and seeming like a hideous spider in ambush.

Rube saw a knife in his hand, and awaited the result with considerable confidence.

Nearer came the Black Rider. He jogged on in a careless, contented mood, and seemed to take no note of what was transpiring around him. Norola was equally quiet, but the shadow on her fair face told of despair rather than resignation.

Still nearer rode the two, until they were beneath the dwarfed tree.

Then, like a boa-constrictor descending on his prey, a dark object swung down from the bush, a knife gleamed in the air, the rope which bound Norola to her captor was severed, and then, with scarcely a perceptible effort, Iron-Armed Abe swung his arm around the girl's waist, and raised her from the saddle.

How it was done, Doctor Rube never clearly knew, but the hunchback showed his great strength by twisting back into the tree, burden and all, and then to a firmer support; and by the time the Black Rider had recovered from his surprise, the Destroyer's mocking laugh was ringing in his ears.

"Ha! ha! ha! where is your captive now? If you want her, come and get her; if you don't care to try it, go and tell King Diamond that she may be found with Iron-Armed Abe."

Evidently the man preferred to be a messenger rather than a fighter, for he no sooner heard Abe's voice than he put spurs to his horse, and galloped away.

But Norola was in the hands of her father, and the rugged old fellow was not ashamed to shed a few tears in his joy at recovering her.

"Et works on my heart like a spring freshet, little 'un," he said, "an' ez ther more effective 'cause I r'ally had my doubts ef I ever see'd ye ag'in; I had 'em sore!"

He would have gone on caressing her forever, it may be; but Abe was in his most practical mood, and he urged them on.

"Our cave is not far away," he said.

"Wait!" said Norola. "There is something for us to do first; I cannot leave Leora!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE HOUR OF VENGEANCE.

ALL the party heard these words with considerable surprise, but it was Doctor Rube who quickly answered:

"Leave Leora? What do you mean?"

"We have been in a cave together, and she is there now, I suppose. We had nothing to eat, and while she slept I stole out to secure something and was captured by the Black Rider."

"But why were you together—why were you with her?"

"She has been very kind to me, and it was she who appeared and took me away last night after you were attacked by the men at Golden Creek."

"You don't mean Leora Templeton, do ye?" Griff

asked. "Ef ye do, I don't go one yard ter help sich a critter. She hez b'en your worst foe—"

"Wrong, father, wrong; Leora has been my friend. She has deceived the Diamond men, and it may be the same with you, but she is a dear and faithful girl."

"Lead the way to her," said Doctor Rube, a new hope making itself felt in his heart.

And then they went on, unheeding Griff's assertion that he still had his doubts, and the cave was found, but Leora was not there, nor did a thorough search reveal her.

She had completely disappeared, much to Norola's grief, so they went on to Abe's new refuge and were soon securely quartered. The Wild had grown somewhat excited during the journey, but the hunchback fitted her up a cosy nook, and as he smoothed her hair he sung the old cradle-song until her weary eyes closed and she slept.

In the mean while, Norola was indignantly denying all attacks on Leora Templeton's character.

"She did not 'lure' me to the City of the Desert," she said. "She came to our cabin, Father Griff, and said that you and one in whom she had an interest—who do you suppose that was, Doctor Rube?—were on the Rattlepan Plain and in danger, and so I left home and went with her. How we journeyed on and on, never overtaking you, and finally being captured by the Black Riders and brought to Golden Valley, I won't tell in detail now; but she has been my friend all the way through, and she saved me from capture last night. I say she is a dear girl!"

Here the speaker looked at Doctor Rube in a way so reproachful that he became confused and troubled, but he was not disposed to give up the battle tamely.

"But what of that conversation I accidentally overheard when Camp was trying to marry you? She took his part, advised you to marry him, was quite heartless and scornful; and if I am any judge, you nearly had a fight—if you'll excuse the last word."

"Nonsense! that was all a pretense. Diamond approached her to become his ally, and as we could see no other hope, we decided that she must appear to become so. And when we were quarreling, Camp was listening at the door. So there, now!"

With this feminine bombshell to close the debate, Norola flashed her pretty eyes upon Doctor Rube, but he was already conquered. More than that, he surrendered joyfully; if Leora was not all bad he was glad of it.

This ripple in her favor brought about a discussion as to whether it was best to make any effort to find her, but Griff and Ned Boxfield opposed the idea so strongly that it was abandoned.

"Since she is the ally of Diamond in the attempt to steal the million of Jacob Templeton, miser millionaire, deceased, I reckon she don't need any backing up here," legally decided the junior.

This opinion, however, cost him the friendship of Norola for the time being, and he repented saying it "in a sackful of ashes," as he gloomily observed to Rube.

The day wore on without events of great importance. There was considerable activity visible among the adherents of Diamond, but they failed to find the new refuge of the little party of fugitives.

Their old one had become uninhabitable. Smoky Mountain became worse every moment, and a dense column of smoke rolled up from Black Pit. The air was full of ashes, many of which were wafted by the north wind toward the valley, to fall like a warning snow upon the City of the Desert.

It was deemed strange by the fugitives that the people did not hasten to flee from the impending peril, but an apathy was shown which was remarkable. They were evidently relying on the fact that Smoky Mountain had done no harm in the past, but they were defying common-sense to trust it now.

The place had a strong attraction for Iron-Armed Abe, and he once went as near it as the heat would permit, an hour or so before dark. He came back in a mood at once restless, exaggerated and impressive.

"The end is near," he said to Doctor Rube, his melodious voice ringing out powerfully. "The demon cannot much longer be held quiet. His heart beats with a sound like distant thunder, and he is blowing smoke and fire from his mouth. The end is near, and ere the rising of many more suns the valley below will be a plain of lava. Ha! ha! where will Diamond's city be, then?"

With these words the strange man went to the side of "Little Nora," and laughed like a happy child, ending with the old lullaby; but Doctor Rube was not surprised, somewhat later, when he announced that he was going to confront Diamond, accompanied by his sister.

Griff and Ned Boxfield opposed the scheme as a suicidal one, but the doctor spoke only when appealed to; then he added surprise to surprise.

"Let them go," he firmly said. "Whatever comes of it, let them go. More than that, I am going, too."

"You?"

"I!"

"Are you mad?"

"Perhaps I am; I don't know; but I am going to seek Leora Templeton. If I have wronged her, I will see her righted."

And from this determination all their arguments and entreaties could not move him.

Thus it was that, as midnight drew near, the three—Doctor Rube, Abe and The Wild—left the cave and started for the valley city. Those who remained behind never expected to see them alive again.

Such a night as that had never before been over and around the City of the Desert. Smoky Mountain was glowing like a vast beacon on the sandy plain. Black Pit was one pillar of light, drenched by smoke and ashes to a dull hue, but shooting high into the air and throwing yellow light over all that vicinity. No need then for lights of man's manufacture; one could see to read coarse print even in the streets of the city. And ever and anon, a boom, as from a far-away cannon, sounded on the air.

It was a night of terror.

"Ha! ha! the demon has burst his chains," said Iron-Armed Abe. "The morning will see the burning lava flowing!"

"Ha! ha!" echoed The Wild, "I seem to hear the voice of Lucifer. This is a merry, merry time, good sirs!"

Doctor Rube shivered. He believed the two were going to their fate, but it was useless to try to control the Destroyer.

But the latter grew cool and methodical as they neared the city, and though the people, alarmed at last, were moving about restlessly and in many cases trying to get their goods away, he made good his boast of taking them undetected to Camp's house, where Diamond had quartered himself since the previous day.

After a series of dodges and *detours*, the trio stood under the stone walls of the house. All knew for what they had come; Iron-Armed Abe to take part in the last act in his hatred for Diamond; Doctor Rube to seek for Leora Templeton.

If any windows were that night fastened they failed to find them; ingress was easy and the critical moment was near at hand.

Iron-Armed Abe had twice promised to find Leora, if she was to be found, before he showed himself to Diamond and started a tumult, and he at once bade Rube follow him when they entered, though the sequel proved that in all probability he had entirely forgotten, for the time, why Rube was there.

He led the way to a door on the second floor without being accosted by any one, pushed it open and entered.

Captain Diamond sat at a table at one side, feverishly turning over a quantity of gold, some of which was already placed in small canvas bags, and it was easy to see he was preparing for flight from the doomed city.

He turned impatiently as he heard a sound at the door and then sprang to his feet. He saw Iron-Armed Abe, with The Wild leaning on his arm, and Doctor Rube close behind.

A look of mingled alarm and fury crossed his cold face, and he darted toward a bell-cord at one side, but the hunchback intercepted him and then coolly cut the cord.

"No, no, King Diamond," he said, "we want no more witnesses here. We shall do very well as it is."

"What do you want?" Diamond demanded, almost with a groan.

"To see you; to talk of the past; to square the account."

Diamond looked at The Wild with a bitter hatred which nothing could destroy. The woman was far quieter than usual and clung tightly to Abe's arm, but her gaze was on her destroyer, and it was plain she recognized "Lucifer."

It was not the scene Doctor Rube had sought, but he lacked the power to withdraw. The serpent's eye, twinkling restlessly, seemed to hold him fascinated.

"Diamond," resumed the Destroyer, "this is Little Nora. I know you recognize her, for you lately shut her up, fearing I would find her. You knew I thought her dead and that my hatred would be the greater if I knew she had lived to suffer so. You reasoned rightly, for who suffers more than the mad?"

He spoke with ominous calmness, but Diamond burst out with great vehemence.

"Why do you blame me so much? What wrong did I do her? I never tried to ruin the girl. Is there no other case on record where men, or women, have loved and then changed their minds?"

"You never loved her. You were rich, proud and of fashionable degree; she was poor, unlearned and humble. You took a fancy to her pretty face and deliberately won her love, intending all the while to cast her off at the end. You did as you planned, and the dastardly deed wrecked her reason. Her gentle nature would not bear the blow. You see what you made her!"

He pointed to the wretched woman, who laughed in her old, unmusical way.

"Ah! this is Lucifer, kind sirs, this is Lucifer!" she said, brokenly.

"Ay, this is Lucifer!" repeated Abe, in a ringing voice. "He is the prince of demons, the ruler of homes and hearts. See, Doctor Rube, what a fiend he is, but hear me when I say his career is past. This night is his last on earth; the hour of doom has come!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE LAST HOURS OF THE DESERT CITY.

DOCTOR RUBE had always been surprised at the manner in which Diamond cowered before the hunchback; and in the present case his mixture of craven fear and struggling defiance was peculiar, but he had yet to learn wherein lay King Diamond's weakness.

The desert Samson had his vulnerable point, but what was it?

The doctor foresaw a long interview which would be well worth looking at, but his mind wandered to Leora and he determined to seek her. Abe was too much occupied to heed him in any way, so, without a waste of words, he turned and left the room.

Abe had given it as his opinion that Leora would be in the same house, and as no servants or anything of the kind were visible, he had the desired opportunity for searching.

In the hall he paused for a moment to look from the northern window upon the grandly terrible scene presented.

The fury of Smoky Mountain was momentarily increasing. A sheet of flame was rising from the crater, ashes fell over the valley like snow and the sickly, yellow light was over all. Golden Valley had never more deserved its name; even the somber dresses of the Black Riders looked golden-hued in the volcanic light.

"The end is near!" muttered the doctor. "As Abe has said, the lava will soon be flowing—too soon, it may be, for my safety. I must find Leora and, if she be indeed less guilty than I have thought, take her to a safer place."

He opened several doors in succession, only to find empty rooms, but he finally reached one which was locked. The key was in the door and, after a brief hesitation, he turned it and entered cautiously.

This caution enabled him to look upon a scene he had not expected. He saw Leora. She was on her knees by a chair, her head pillowed on her arms, her hands clasped beyond it.

Unless the position was deceptive, she was praying and, at the same time, shutting out the light from Smoky Mountain.

Doctor Rube paused and instinctively bared his head. It was not that she prayed, for under the touch of alarm the wicked pray as fervently as the good, but the girl made a picture which was not in keeping with sin's terror.

"Leora!"

He spoke lowly and brokenly. The girl started slightly but did not raise her head.

"Leora!"

This time she turned, sprang to her feet and stood facing him. That face, with its splendid beauty, was pale and agitated.

"Leora, forgive me if I intrude, but I—"

He paused, at a loss for words, but she spoke quickly.

"You here, here, among those who will kill you at sight? Doctor Rube, this is madness. Flee, flee while there is yet time!"

Her voice thrilled him.

"Why should I flee? Of what value is my life? Why should you care for my safety when I have been your foe?"

"That does not make your life less valuable. If you have done me injustice in the past I now believe it was done conscientiously and through error. It does not matter if the injustice is continued, for I feel that I shall never again see San Francisco. This dreadful place is doomed and I shall lose my own life in its fall."

"Never!" he cried, striding forward and catching her hand. "It shall not be! I have come to save you, to bear you away. Hasten; go with me!"

"No, no!" she murmured, faintly.

A booming noise like the distant note of a cannon floated over the valley from Smoky Mountain.

"I say it shall be; you shall not perish here. The door was locked upon you; you were a prisoner. I have suspected this and I am come to release you. Norola has told of your noble efforts in her behalf. I have wronged you and would now make amends. Leora, come with me!"

He spoke with subdued intensity. She trembled like a leaf, but he placed his arm around her and she did not repulse him.

"Why will you risk anything for one so bad as you think me?" she brokenly asked.

"Before Heaven, I think no evil of you. My opinion has changed. I know I have been under a cloud, but it is passing away. I respect—nay, I adore you! Leora, my dear girl, forgive me for the past and trust me as I trust you. There is a mystery somewhere, but if we both live it shall be cleared away. If you perish here I shall never know the truth. Come with me, trust me as a friend, and if I can save you I will. Come!"

Leora trembled more than ever before this d-dresser, but she still hesitated.

"This is but an artifice born of your manly honor to get me away. Do not deceive yourself; you will no longer believe in me when we are safe."

"I will believe and trust you ever. How can I do otherwise when I love you? Ay, I will speak the words, though I have been your bitter foe and you must hate me."

"Doctor Rube, I do not hate you, for I believe you the soul of honor. But, as I have a feeling that I shall perish in this terrible place, let me solemnly swear that I am the real Leora Templeton, and that I have engaged in no plot with Diamond. When I knew him as St. Jerome I did believe him an honorable man, and defend him, but my eyes have been opened; he has proved himself my deadly foe and the persecutor of an innocent girl—Norola. Something of the truth I learned from a tool of his hiring; a man called Jake; and it was because of this I followed you across the desert."

Back to Rube's recollection came the words Norola had stated Leora said to her before they started: "Your father and one in whom I have an interest are on the desert;" and he looked into her face with a wild hope.

"But why should you care what became of me?"

"Because, because— Oh! Doctor Rube!"

Her hesitation, her confusion, her expression made all clear, and as he clasped her tighter in his arms she pillowed her head on his shoulder. Clouds there still were on their lives, but they were drifting away and all might be clear if they lived to leave Golden Valley.

But even as they stood thus the house shook as though in the grasp of a giant, a deeper boom sounded on the air and the sickly yellow light fell even more strongly into the room. The demon of Smoky Mountain was raging madly to cast off the last of his chains and go forth to blast and destroy.

"It is an earthquake!" exclaimed Doctor Rube.

"Come, there is no time to lose. Let us go!"

They turned from the room, hand in hand, and opened the door. As they did so a lithe form darted along the hall, closely followed by a huge, misshapen one. They were Diamond and Abe. The latter caught his victim and uttered a triumphant roar.

But the desperate king of the valley turned at bay and fought like a tiger with hand, foot, tooth and nail. They fell to the floor and rolled over like wild beasts. They arose, with Diamond held tightly in Abe's arms, his face white as marble and a white froth on his lips. He was like one in a fit.

"Ho! ho! who triumphs now, King Diamond?"

"Down with Lucifer—down, down!"

Abe and The Wild spoke together, but man's wrath grew small and weak before a grander, loftier power.

Again the house shook; again the internal elements boomed. The hall reeled, and the walls cracked until the yellow light fell through and a stone rattled from its place.

Doctor Rube would wait for no more. Holding fast to Leora, who was deathly pale but grandly calm, he rushed away; but Abe overtook him at the door, bearing Diamond in his arms, The Wild at his side.

"Follow me!" said the hunchback, more calmly, and with an anxious glance at the fiery pillar arising above Black Pit. "I know the shortest road across the valley."

Doctor Rube did not demur, and the flight was begun. They saw frightened people on all hands, but all were fleeing like themselves. No one was

mad enough to delay longer, for they knew the City of the Desert was doomed. The ground trembled under their feet, the air was hot and ashes-laden, and over all was the sickly yellow light.

One-third the distance to the mountain had been passed when Diamond, who had lain like a senseless thing in Abe's iron arms, suddenly aroused.

"Redspur!" he cried, sharply. "This way; help, help!"

All saw the stalwart Black Rider chief and he paused in his flight and looked at them. Another appeal from his master and he unsheathed his saber and barred their way. His grim, gladiator-like face had never been more grim, and the volcanic light showed it stamped with determination.

He dashed at Iron-Armed Abe, who had no visible weapon, and, expecting to see him cleave the hunchback's head, Doctor Rube drew his revolver and pulled the trigger.

Only a dull click followed; the weapon missed fire.

Leora uttered a moan of terror, but Abe's bold front never wavered. He passed Diamond to Rube, as though he was to be taken care of like a rare jewel, and almost in the same breath darted under Redspur's arm.

They dropped to the ground in a death-grapple and rolled over and over while The Wild laughed in unreasoning glee. Doctor Rube held a knife at Diamond's breast, but the man was too thoroughly cowed to face an ordinary enemy. All his old resolution was gone.

Leora aroused.

"Confess that you have wronged me!" she said. "Tell the truth now, St. Jerome, and say whether I am the real Leora Templeton."

"Yes, yes; I swear to it," he said. "I give up the game. I have played and lost. Only let me go free now!"

"What was your object?"

"I hated you and yours, and my mother hated your race before me. She left me that legacy."

"What was your plot?"

The question remained unanswered. Iron-Armed Abe arose, flushed with a new victory, and Redspur would never fight again. It was not hard to prophesy where his grave would be.

The Destroyer looked toward Smoky Mountain.

"Come!" he cried, sharply, "let us go. It is death to remain here; the lava is coming!"

There was no room to doubt it. Plainly seen in the yellow light a darker substance was moving on like a gigantic roller meant to crush whatever was in the valley.

Then all fled wildly. Our friends mixed with the Black Riders and none paused to do them harm. It was for life all labored, and none tarried or burdened themselves; none except Iron-Armed Abe. He bore Diamond as he would have borne a child.

On, on toward the hills; on, on to escape the lavatic flood. It was a thrilling race for life!

CHAPTER XL.

THE DOOMED CITY—CLOSING REVELATIONS.

IRON-ARMED ABE watched the advancing flood with a keen gaze, and as he saw The Wild falter his resolution was taken. He tossed Diamond aside contemptuously and caught up his sister instead. His judgment was confirmed when his old foe remained prostrate on the ground, too overcome to rise.

There was no time to lose; the hills seemed to bend forward as though promising shelter, and it was never more needed.

Doctor Rube could not equal the hunchback with his wonderful strength, but he kept his arm about Leora's waist and they ran at full speed.

It was a narrow chance, but they reached the higher ground in safety and climbed to an elevated spot just as the destroying flood went past. It swept over the spot where lay dethroned King Diamond and went on to bury his city and erase all that remained of his great work.

Friend and foe then looked alike on the dread scene, no one thinking of going further then.

Black Pit was pouring out its torrent; the mountain demon had fully burst his chains, at last; the City of the Desert was doomed.

The lavatic flood struck the place and the humble cabins vanished like egg-shells. The water of Golden Creek hissed and boiled under the touch of the red hand. Leaving a level waste behind, the flood rolled on. The lofty walls of the stone buildings crumbled as the cabins had done; nothing could stay the march of the destroying element.

Standing there, Doctor Rube thought of what Abe had told him of the building of the place; how Diamond had discovered the gold in the creek and gathered his rough men and his city around him. It was not hard to build the latter. Small as the Horseshoe comparatively was, it contained almost all that was needed and man's ingenuity did the rest. What wild dreams Diamond had felt for power and wealth no one could tell, but now man and city were alike doomed and—gone!

Yes; the flood had reached the southern boundary of the city and only a level waste was visible in the yellow light; not a wall remained visible.

"Come!" said Abe, his voice a little hushed. "Let us go to our cave!"

They went, and were warmly welcomed by Griff, Ned Boxfield and Norola.

"Et are a sight for blind eyes, fur et'd make 'em see," said the veteran. "When you went away I had my doubts ef we would ever see ye ag'in; I had 'em sore; an' when ther fire an' brimstun got a-flow-in' we all give ye up."

"It was not to be," said Iron-Armed Abe, in a deep voice. "Our time had not come. I can say I have been brought through many dangers. My narrowest escape was at Diamond's house at the time of the explosion. He first dropped me down a trap, whereby I strangely disappeared from your view, Doctor Rube, and then, when his chemicals exploded, the house was on fire; but my time had not come and I escaped. Now, I hope my dark career is past; Diamond is dead and little Nora is partially avenged."

"But I shall never know why he hated and plotted against me," said Leora in a trembling voice.

"You will know all," said the hunchback serenely, "for I have gathered thread by thread, until I can tell the story as well as he might have done. But not now, not now; we all need sleep."

They yielded to his will and, taking Wild in his

arms he lulled her to sleep with the old cradle-song, his melodious voice sounding more tender than usual. His work was done.

Another day dawned and those who would look on the scene before them. Lovely Golden Valley was no more. From one side to the other of the Horseshoe it was one bed of lava. Trees, grass, creek, city—all had disappeared from view. Smoky Mountain was still active, but less so than on the previous night, and it was plain that the worst was over.

Diamond's former people, or such as had survived, were seen on the hills acting not unlike hive-less bees.

Then our friends met in the cave again to hear the story of King Diamond.

"He was born heir to strange freaks and fancies," said Iron-Armed Abe. "His mother was a strange, restless, superstitious woman, who finally died because her system was devoured by her unnatural mind, consumed, as it were, by internal fire. She lived long enough to teach her son what she had not conveyed to him of her nature as a birthright. He grew up a wild, reckless, cruel, and intensely superstitious boy; from the hour of his birth the internal fire was working, though at twenty-one he was a strangely handsome and fascinating young man, betraying his eccentricities only on close acquaintance.

"At that time he came to us at White Pine Ridge. Having once related that epoch in his life and that of Little Nora, let me not again refer to it. I gained his confidence in our rambles over the hills. He wore a brilliant diamond at his breast, the same you have all seen. It was the gift of his mother, who told him he would succeed in all his plans while he kept it.

"He gained another fancy while at White Pine Ridge. We one day met a strolling woman who wished to tell our fortunes. I did not believe in such nonsense and declined, but Diamond did believe and she mumbled a prediction, as such impostors on common-sense will.

"She told Diamond his career would be a brilliant one if he avoided doing certain things. Pointing to me, she said she foresaw trouble between us. 'But,' she went on to say, 'if you ever try to wet your hand in his blood, ruin, dark and terrible, will be yours. You may hire him killed, if you will, but dare not harm him yourself.'

"This, of course, was a mere freak on her part, but when I laughed at her she went further. She told Diamond that if he ever killed a woman, or influenced others to do so, his fate would be terrible; I wish I could remember the dark horrors she prophesied if he did this.

"Well, the fortune-teller was a humbug, of course, but Diamond's early education and his strange mind made him believe in the prediction to the letter. This, in brief, explains why, since he learned that Little Nora lived, he would not kill her, or allow any of his tools to do so; and it explains why, even when ardently desiring my death, I have placed a revolver in his hand and vainly bade him fire. Not until to-night, when he thought death imminent, did he ever attempt my life.

"And what of the Templeton affair? Here his same superstition, or, perhaps I should say, the same prophecy, worked. Diamond's mother hated Ralph Templeton, the father of Leora, because he once paid her attention and then, when he learned her nature, broke with her. In her wild, unnatural way she left a heritage of hatred to her son, and when he saw the girl become the lawful heir of Jacob Templeton, the miser, he resolved to prevent it. But how could it be done, since he dared not shed the blood of a woman?

"Then it was that his strange brain conceived the strange plot he so nearly carried out. He resolved to prove the heiress an impostor, and at once revenge his mother and secure a million dollars. The last object was not a strong one, since he had such wealth in Golden Valley, but since he dared not shed Leora's blood it was worth including in his plot.

"A little over a year ago Doctor Rube was kidnapped at Snicker's Gulch and brought here. You know what followed. The woman you saw that night was not Leora Templeton, but one ten years older, and really little resembling her; but all that paint, powder and other artifices of the toilet could do was done to deceive you, and in the dim, evening light the resemblance was strong.

"But it was all a planned affair with the woman for an accomplice. She was not chloroformed at all, and the escape from the room was prearranged. My share in the affair was, however, purely accidental, and you will remember, she didn't want to trust me. Well, when she made the sound which drew Diamond and the Black Riders upon us, she did so purposely. After that night she washed off the paint, powder, and so on, which would not have deceived you by day as fresh beauty, and became a fairly good-looking woman of thirty or more years. She now disappears from the scene.

"I dare say, you begin to catch Diamond's plot. It had been rumored that Leora Templeton was killed in a railroad accident, and that an old man who knew her saw her lying dead with one hand severed from her arm. She afterward wrote to a San Francisco paper that this was not a fact; but having no friends, did not appear to prove that she lived. You were early selected as the chief witness to baffle her when she applied for Jacob Templeton's money, and the man who urged you to remove from Snicker's Gulch to San Francisco was sent by Diamond, though you hesitated so long that Beesinger had secured the million dollars for her.

"When you arrived in San Francisco, you met Diamond and Miss Templeton, as he had planned. Seeing Miss Templeton, you thought her the heroine of your adventure when you were ordered to sever the hand of that other woman. You claimed her acquaintance; she denied all knowledge of you; you heard of the railroad accident, and argued: 'This is not Leora Templeton, but an impostor. I was ordered to amputate her hand at the City of the Desert, to make her look like the victim of a railroad accident, but for some reason the plan was abandoned.'

"This course of reasoning was just what Diamond expected and desired, and he wanted it advanced at the trial of Alton vs. Templeton. Perhaps you will ask why he did not hire some of his numerous tools

to give such false testimony as he desired. It might have been done, but he was afraid they would break down on cross-examination. He resolved to have a thoroughly honorable man, who would testify conscientiously, and I now believe if the case had gone on without any foreign events Leora Templeton would have been deprived of her fortune."

Doctor Rube looked repentantly at the fair girl whose character he had heard cleared, but Iron-Armed Abe continued:

"The girl you knew as Esther Alton was not next of kin in the Templeton succession, but the daughter of Camp. She and the old woman who professed to be her mother were sent from here to play the 'poor, but worthy' game and enlist your sympathies in their behalf. I may also say that Ben Bolter's double attempt on your life was done contrary to Diamond's orders. He would not have had you killed for a good deal of money, because, as I have said, he relied on you to wrest Leora Templeton's fortune away. As for your quarrels with her, you were deceived and she was often hasty and petulant."

The story was told, and, with all made clear, Doctor Rube asked Leora to step aside. They held a long conversation, while the hunchback again sang the cradle-song, and Griff, Norola and Boxfield talked fitfully. When they returned there was a look on their faces as though they had come to an understanding.

That afternoon what remained of Diamond's people left the Horseshoe; that evening our friends went also.

Until Yuma was reached they journeyed together, but there Iron-Armed Abe paused.

"We part company here," he said, more gently than usual. "Little Nora and I have a road of our own to tread."

Remonstrances proved useless, and as no one could doubt the hunchback's ability to care for The Wild, farewells were duly said.

Those who remained watched the strange pair for a long time as they rode away, and when distance hid them from view they never saw them again.

We need scarcely say that the suit of Alton vs. Templeton abruptly ended, and the plotting claimant and her so-called mother fled. A Beesinger was so rejected at baffling J. Q. A. Smith that he reinstated Ned Boxfield in his service, and, drinking harder than ever, soon went out of the world, and left the entire business to his former "Junior." We may say, parenthetically, that about the same time Norola became Mrs. Boxfield.

One word, too, may be given to say that Doctor Rube, as a physician, is now a shining light of San Francisco; but we are sure the reader will surmise that he took Leora Templeton and her million into his keeping, fearing other plots against her. But none came, and their married life is very happy.

Griff still lives, and he still has his "doubts," but they do not suffice to make him unhappy.

Our friends often picture Iron-Armed Abe and Little Nora living in some wild retreat, peaceful and contented in their way, but it is all uncertainty.

Once, since that night of terror Doctor Rube has looked on the Horseshoe.

He found Golden Valley one plain of lava. No remnant of the City of the Desert was visible. Not a green thing arose above the dead level. Under that crust lies what is mortal of King Diamond. The serpent's eye did not suffice to keep him from harm.

Smoky Mountain is no longer an active volcano, but, grim, dark and frowning, it looks down on the plain of lava. Men go past and think it a most gloomy place, little knowing what is there buried. And only the far-traveling vulture, pausing in his flight to rest on the edge of the silent crater, gives life to the desolate spot.

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